

Chris Murphy

February 15, 2026

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-18

Sermon Title: God is Love

Prayer...

Do you remember when you were in elementary school and everyone had a shoe box or some other container that was decorated and put on their desk and each person in the class received a Valentine card from every other person? As a kid, I remember liking this experience because it made me feel good to receive a Valentine from everyone. As a guy, I would pick out a cool Valentine Card like something related to Star Wars or maybe something like Snoopy and the Peanuts Gang. I would give out cards to everyone and then when it was time to look for cards from other students, I would try to find the Valentines cards from the girls I liked just to see if there was a hint that on the card, there was a cool message, like Stay cute or something else that made me feel special.

Well I thought about us putting containers on the pews in front of each of you, so that we could pass out Valentines, but instead I will just say the words to all of you- Stay Cute. What I like about elementary school is that long before any of us kids had girlfriends or boyfriends, we found a way to all feel loved and appreciated because everyone got a Valentine.

Maybe church should feel that way too. We all are invited to show love to each other. We also are reminded when we come together that at the heart of all creation is the gift of God who is defined as love personified in Jesus. God is love. May I suggest that in a real way, God is everyone's Valentine. Sometimes I remind you that you are God's favorite... Today, I want to remind you that God wants to come up to you and say, Would you be my Valentine?

Is that kind of corny? Probably. But is it true? Oh yes. God loves you. My wife Karen reminds me from time to time as I pastor here that even though church is a good place to reflect on deep ideas related to God and life. What we most want to hear in church is the truth that God loves us. We not only want to hear that truth, we want to feel God's love.

So once again may I remind you, God loves you. I, your pastor, loves you. We, your brothers and sisters in Christ, love you. If you need a Valentine today, remember God is your valentine and in some ways like in elementary school we can all be Valentine's to each other because we desperately need to feel loved.

This Lent we are focusing on the Book Surrender to Love. I will begin exploring that book with you next week. Then March 1st and March 8th we will have guest preachers. Lish Mannerter will preach on March 1st and Melissa Ramos will preach on March 8th. I will be out of town on those Sundays doing some teaching and learning with a spiritual formation ministry called Renovare. I attend a cohort retreat for this ministry once per year and when I go I give a talk about love. It's a talk I share with you from time to time, so I think I will remind you about my journey with God's love again today.

When I was a senior in college, I was worried about life after school. It was close to the Lenten season and I asked my mentor Jerry Sittser, A Professor at Whitworth, if he had any advice about my next steps after college. Jerry was wise enough not to tell me what to do. Instead, he encouraged me to go on a personal retreat at a cool retreat center near Spokane that was run by a group of nuns. So, one weekend I set up a little retreat for myself. Outside of having a few meals with some nuns, I spent a lot of time in a little cabin in the woods praying. After many hours of personal reflection, I realized I had one desire for my life after college. I simply wanted to learn to receive God's love. That was my prayer. It dawned on me that instead of rushing off from college and doing some radical ministry. Instead of traveling the world and serving others as the primary goal of my life, what I really needed was to learn to receive love.

Now, it may be helpful to know that in college I was already active in ministry with an urban ministry called En Christo that cared for vulnerable people in downtown Spokane. I had also spent time in Central America doing mission work. I was a resident chaplain in my dorm. Maybe some people need to be reminded to reach out more. What I needed was to slow down and receive because I was struggling with burnout at the age of 22 years old. I knew that if I focused solely on doing more ministry after college, I would not survive. I would instead fall into a depression born out of the need to always do more and never find rest. As I look back on my college days, what I think I experienced at some point was an illness, I like to call, the never doing enough disease. In other words, if I was not actively doing something radical for Jesus in ministry, I felt unworthy of love. I am not sure how I contracted “the never doing enough disease” but I am pretty sure it came from my ego being affirmed from doing intense ministry. Churches also have a way of lifting up people for service, so I was a prime candidate to get this disease since I was finding some much power from identifying as a radical Christian.

If I was a spiritual director, diagnosing my condition toward the end of college, I might also say I was struggling with a mild to moderate case of scrupulosity. According to the field of Psychology, “scrupulosity is a subtype of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) characterized by pathological guilt or obsession regarding moral or religious issues, often resulting in severe anxiety.” I think I did struggle with the need to be so much like Jesus, that I felt an unnecessary level of guilt when I failed to be a radical Christian.

So you may ask what was my treatment plan. In God’s goodness, led by that prayer to receive God’s love, I returned home to Seattle after college. I lived with my parents, got involved in a great young adult ministry at my dad’s church where he served as a pastor, and I started a nine-month spiritual exercises program, where I learned to pray in a contemplative way. I learned to spend time each day resting in God’s love. I focused less on doing things for God and more on being with God. I went on a monthly retreat with my spiritual exercises program cohort group. I met with a spiritual director every two weeks and I dedicated an hour each day to calm, quiet, reflective, prayer. I

read the Bible but less to dissect it and more in a mystical way. I read the Bible with the goal of deepening my intimacy with God.

One might say God became my Valentine that year.

Eventually, during the fall, I found work at about 30 hours per week as an Americorp Volunteer. My job was to run an After School program at an Episcopal Church located near an elementary school. Most of the kids in the school received free lunches and were from many different cultures. God gave me a place to serve, but this time my service flowed less from a need to please God and more out of an overflow of learning to receive God's love.

Fast forward to today and I am serving our church with you. The reason we have a Peace Garden and a retreat center ministry is because I want to make sure I help us as a congregation learn to receive God's love. Yes, I want us to do radical ministry. I want us to care for the most vulnerable both within our congregation and in the surrounding community, but I want our ministry to be done in a health way. I want us to not find our worth in ministry, but solely in the grace, hope, peace, and love of God.

God is the lover of our souls. God is our friend. God is our Mother and Father. God is our sister and brother. God is revealed in her creation. And yes, God is our Valentine.

So let us spread this message of love to our neighbors and especially to those who feel lonely. Let us embody God's love to others. Let us also take time to quietly be in God's presence and hear God's word to us. I love you. I love you. I love you.

AMEN.