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Love is that thing that eludes us. It is something that looms in front of us and taunts us. It is that thing that we are told to pursue after our entire life.

But what is love? Do we have any idea what love really is? How are we supposed to search after something that we are not really sure about?



After Jesus' crucifixion some of the disciples were walking along the dusty desert road outside of Jerusalem. They were heartbroken. And they were on their way to their hometown called Emmaus. Their best-friend and mentor had been murdered and they were not sure what their life's purpose would be. Something terrible had happened and they simply couldn't see a way forward.

That's when a stranger joined them as they walked down the road. The man could tell that the disciples were distraught and he got them talking about all the things they'd witnessed and endured. A week earlier they had seen an entire city erupt with joy as their friend Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a colt. And then, within a few days, those same people who celebrated his entry murdered their friend and teacher, Jesus. For hours these disciples talked with the stranger about Jesus and all the wonderful things that Jesus had done.

And, as they walked, the stranger then began to talk to them about the Old Testament, about Abraham and about Moses. He told them about how all the things they experienced fit so perfectly into the story of God's work in the world. With each story, they understood more and more about God and God's love for them. This stranger was clearly a great teacher. And the words he told them about who God was were so perfectly spoken.

As they approached their home, they insisted that this stranger stop and stay with them and, at the very least, share a meal with them. And, at dinner, they invited the stranger to say the prayer of blessing over the food.

As the stranger lifted the bread and broke it into pieces, their eyes were opened and they realized that the stranger was actually Jesus himself. And in that very moment Jesus disappeared.

The Bible tells us that, as the disciples looked around the room, they realized that Jesus was no longer dead. They turned to each other and said these words, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”



Where I grew up, in Salt Lake City, there was one dominant religion: basketball. We were super fans. We loved basketball so much that our hearts literally burned within us.

I remember when I was in 3rd grade a professional basketball player came to our school to participate in an assembly. His name was Karl Malone and that year he had been recruited at the age of 22 to move to Salt Lake City, this city in the desert, and to play as a part of the Utah Jazz. As soon as the school assembly finished, a few of my friends gathered around Karl and asked him if he’d oblige us by joining us on the playground for a game of basketball. The rules of the game were simple. Every boy in my third-grade class would be on one team and Karl would be on the other team.

Compared to our class of fifteen boys, Karl was enormous. His smile beamed as he passed the ball to us and he considered how he would navigate through a maze of erratically waving hands and feet. With two steps and a little scoot backward toward the hoop, he checked five kids with his hip and scored an easy layup. We could see that our dream of beating Karl would not really play out very well. Then Karl did something totally uncharacteristic. He let us win.

When the game was finished, Karl looked at us and said, “You guys are pretty good. If you keep practicing, you might be a pro some day.” I was convinced. Karl had placed a vision within my heart of greatness. When he left us there on the playground, I turned my eyes across the city that stretched out in the distance far below my mountaintop schoolyard and I set my mind on being great like him someday. If I could describe the feeling that I had that day, I would say that I felt like there was a great future in front of me.



Passion is one of those things that most people first experience when they are a kid. It is that thing that causes them to spend hours drawing pictures or baking cookies in the kitchen. It is that first fascination that opens up their minds to a much bigger world

and the reality that there is limitless potential that this world holds for them or for anyone else that would take it seriously.

Yet, there is nothing that a child ever does that is not a learned behavior. Kids minds are like sponges. It seems like they learn a thousand new things a day and they learn by imitating those around them.



At the very beginning of the Bible there is a depiction of a man named Abram. We don't know a lot about him or his people. But what we do know is that God spoke a vision to him of another land for his people. God gave him a vision of how consequential his life might actually be and how many people he might impact with his life. One day, as Abram looked out across the vast desert sky of his childhood home, a voice spoke to him from heaven. It was the voice of God. And in that voice Abram received a vision that was far beyond anything he had ever imagined before.

Because of God's voice, Abram began an incredible journey. The voice from God told him that someday millions of people would eventually emerge from his lineage and they would be blessed by literally every step of faith that he took in his life. How many of us really have any belief that our lives could ever be that consequential?

God's instructions for Abram were for him to step out in a new direction. They were for Abram to venture out from his place of familiarity to an unknown place that held limitless potential for him and for his descendents for generations to come. So, Abram did just that. He and his wife and his fatherless nephew and a few others began a journey out across a vast and unknown desert following a promise from God that something much bigger and much better awaited them if only they would believe.



Have you ever felt your heart beating more intensely because of a positive and powerful vision for the world? Have you ever been inspired to rise up and to commit your life to something bigger than yourself? Have you ever truly experienced passion in your life? Or, perhaps, have you ever felt that some part of you was designed to help change the world forever and to bless all of humanity?

Hearts were not just designed to pump blood from one place to another in our bodies. Hearts were designed to feel and to emote.

They were designed be filled with love and hope and to lead us into greater and greater adventures in our life.

When people fall in love, they do crazy things. People in love find themselves stepping out in radical ways. They wear strange and unlikely clothes. They leave their families and friends. They will give great big speeches and they will even walk away from the life that they had known until that point.

For just as moment, consider the reality that love is something that only comes from God. What if that sensation of love is something we are designed to follow with every fiber of our being? And, what if we are all destined to lead a life of adventure and a life greater than our wildest dreams? What if love leads us to a place of unlimited possibility?



One day when I was twelve-years-old my older brother walked into the family room and said, “I know where Karl Malone lives.”

“What?” It took me a moment to process what he was saying. “Do you mean that we will just drive to Karl’s house and wait for him to get there?”

Graham smiled back at me... “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

A few minutes later we were on our way to Karl’s house in our wood-paneled Ford Fairlane station wagon. Graham kept reciting different versions of what he was going to say.

My brother was the student body president of his high school. One of his jobs as president was to secure an amazing speaker for the big assembly. His big idea...get Karl Malone to agree to surprise the whole school and deliver words that would fill every student with a vision of their life that was bigger than they ever imagined.

Karl was now in his ninth year playing professional basketball and let’s just say that he wasn’t a rookie anymore. He was a BIG deal. Karl Malone and Michael Jordan’s name were often used in the same sentence. Many deemed Karl to be one of the greatest power forwards in history. And Karl’s team, the Utah Jazz, had become one of the most formidable teams in the NBA.

We stopped the car a few houses short from where Karl Malone supposedly lived and we stared toward the house in star-

struck wonder. We simply sat there in the car with the engine off and we waited in silence.

Graham took his hands off the wheel, “Do you think he’ll come?” I could tell that he was nervous. His voice was higher pitched.

I was not going let Graham turn the car around now— we had come to far. “Let’s just wait...he’ll come.” I had no idea what I was talking about, but I felt that if I expressed hope there was a better chance something would happen.

Then something crazy did happened. A car pulled down the street and toward his house at the end of the cul-de-sac and slowed down. We watched as it passed by us and then proceeded to pull into his driveway. It was Karl!

Before I knew what was happening, my brother got out of the car and said, “Wait here.” He stood up as tall as he could and puffed out his muscles as he walked toward the house wearing his bright red letterman jacket.

I sat alone, all by myself. I was sure these would be the last moments that I would see my brother before he was carted off to jail for stalking a celebrity.

Low and behold, a *huge* and hulking Karl Malone emerged from the vehicle. My brother looked like a little child standing in front of Karl and for a few minutes I watched as my big brother simply chatted with him. When my brother opened the door to the car again, I literally jumped out of my seat with excitement. Neither of us cared that Karl wasn’t able to speak at the assembly due to a scheduling conflict. We were just amazed that he was willing to spend time out of his day talking with us. We were just kids.



What kind of nervousness did Abram experience as he stood there talking with God? Was Abram insane or courageous to have headed out across a wild and completely unexplored desert toward an unknown land? There was every chance that his journey would end in total devastation and destruction.

The Bible tells us that the words God spoke to Abram were these,

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I

will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram did it! He wasn't a whippersnapper. He was 75 years old! Yet, he still committed himself to a treacherous new adventure. He was inspired with the vision of blessing other people with his life.

The vision of greatness that God extended to Abram that day was so radically different than the kind of greatness that most people in the world strive for. The vision that God set on Abram's heart was all about things that would someday happen as a result of Abram's faithfulness. Abram would never see the fulfillment of the vision, but he was completely sold out on it. This was not about Abram. It was about God and God's work in the world.

God's plan was not just to bless Abram with tons of wealth and land. No. God's plan was to bless “all the families of the earth.” God wanted to extend God's love to every house and every person.

But why?

Why wouldn't God just bless every family right away? Why would God choose this long-game of love? And, why did God choose a 75-year-old who had seemingly never accomplished anything in his entire life?

Perhaps God wanted the world to know that it is never too late to set out on a new adventure. It's never too late to follow your heart!

Who knows.

However, we do have the benefit of looking back on the course of human history and seeing that God has, in fact, blessed the entire earth through Abram. It has taken thousands and thousands of years, but we can actually see how God has changed this world by extending his love from one person to another.



When my brother and I were starting Highlands Church, we decided to set an appointment with a pastor of a thriving church near Sacramento. The pastor's name was Rick Stedman (son of Ray).

We met him in the lobby of his church, which was designed like a café, and we simply asked him if he had any tips or best practices that he would recommend. We had our legal pads in front of us and were ready to take as many notes as we needed.

Then, he held up his pointer finger to the sky and this is what he said, “Love one person at a time.” I remember being kind of frustrated. He had experienced such a great career as a pastor and we had travelled for over an hour! And the only thing he told us was this one sentence! Love one person at a time?!%?

I remember that for years I would tell my friends the story of our interaction with Rick and I would do so to illustrate my disappointment with his lack of generosity. I knew that if someone came to me I would have shared every single idea or helpful hint I'd ever acquired along the way.

Today, I don't see things the same way. Now I see the genius of what Rick was offering us that day. If he had rambled on for hours about how to counsel people in grief, or how to mentor parents, or how to structure a recovery ministry, we would never have really remembered what he said. To this day, I clearly remember every point he made...because he only made one point: love one person at a time.

What if that is the absolute best way to summarize God's work in the world? What if God's plan all along has been for the world to be blessed, in entirety, through one single person?

I wonder if this is the kind of realization that the disciples had when Jesus appeared as a stranger beside them on the way to Emmaus? Perhaps, when he recounted the stories from the Old Testament that day, they began to perceive how perfect God's plan had been from the very beginning. Perhaps Jesus opened their eyes to the profound and miraculous way that God had blessed the entire earth through Abram. Moreover, they might have sensed that if God had done such a significant work through one person in the past, maybe God might do something incredible through their life too.



Perhaps one of the big problems that we have with love is that we have turned it into a destination. We have made love an object or a thing to strive toward rather than something we can embody and experience as we travel toward our final destination. Love is not about going somewhere; it is about being somewhere...or rather with someone.

Since beginning Highlands Church, we've always loved to use the phrase "where the journey begins" to describe God's work here. One way that I've vamped on this theme with my staff is by encouraging them "not to be so focused on the destination that you miss the journey."

I always imagine the day that I will meet Jesus face to face. And, as I'm standing there with him, I could easily see me asking him, "Did I do a good job? Look at all the things I accomplished." That's when I think Jesus could just as easily say, "You missed the entire point." And, just like he did with those disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus would carefully tell the story of God. I'll bet it would be really simple. And, I'll bet that the point would be, "the purpose of life is to love one person at a time."

Especially in ministry, it is easy to get so caught up in the details. It's so easy to see how each project or initiative can bring about vast good for the people of the world. With the destination and the dream out in front, God brings together fantastic teams of very smart and talented people and they get to work. The goal looms large and day by day everyone can see lives being changed. The planning meetings go well and the goals of the project at hand are met. Then you move on to the next project. This pattern then has the potential to repeat itself indefinitely for the rest of your life.

But, there is another way. The other way to travel forward doesn't look all that different. You still reach the final destination and you still accomplish your goals. The difference is that along the way you appreciate each moment and you realize that God's bigger purpose (bigger than getting to the finish line) is for you to love the people you are working with. In this way of looking at things, life is more about the journey than about the destination.



When my friend Vern invited me to his house to play basketball, I brought my own ball with me, which was worn completely down. It was a ball I had first purchased in the third grade shortly after meeting Karl Malone. It was now six-years-old and all the little bumps designed to allow the player to grip the ball had been rubbed into a smooth and shiny finish. I must have played about a thousand times at the elementary playground that was a half-mile from my house.

Though I loved the feel of the ball, it was honestly almost impossible to play with. Still, it was what I had, so I brought it.

Vern's house was near Westminster College, which had the best hardwood basketball courts in town. When we arrived, we discovered that the courts were closed that day to allow the entire Utah Jazz basketball team to have their practice there. We were not disappointed.

We snuck into the gym and sat on the side watching them play and shoot hoops for almost an hour. We could hardly believe that we were this close to our heroes. Our hearts were burning within our chests.

When the practice was done I borrowed someone's permanent marker and the entire basketball team lined up to write their names on my smooth basketball. Because the ball was so smooth, the autographs stood out amazingly. There was one autograph that was missing and I looked out across the court to see Karl. He was exhausted. Whether he was practicing or playing, he always gave it everything he had.

Even though I was scared, I yelled out at him, "Karl! Will you sign our ball?" He turned to look at us, a couple of awkward teens who had invaded his private practice session, and then he walked across the court to sign the basketball. But, that's not all. He asked us how we were doing.

I remember walking away from the practice that day with the greatest sense of victory. Inside I felt like I'd stolen something or gotten away with highway robbery. How could I ever have been so lucky? Within minutes, my piece of junk basketball went from something I was ready to throw in the trash to the greatest treasure in my entire life.



God wants us to know that we have value. God wants us to hear that we have been designed for greatness beyond our wildest dreams. If we look back on the course of Abram's life, we can see how his simple steps of faith in God resulted in overwhelming good for this world.

I wonder if when Karl was a kid in Louisiana his Baptist pastor taught him the story of Abram who was willing to set out on a great journey of faith. Did that same pastor tell Karl that the secret to life was to love one person at a time?

Some people may look at the lives of Karl Malone and Abram and suggest that their greatness could be judged based on the distance

they travelled or the games they won. This is what the world would definitely choose to gauge.

However, our greatest potential for impacting the world is far more expansive. The number of lives that are changed when we let ourselves be guided and framed by love are more than the stars in the sky. Love is atomic. It is nuclear. Though it begins small, it has all the potential to radiate outward and bring about a universe of change.

Whatever we have come to believe about love, we must understand that it is not a destination. It is not something that we need to chase after.

Love is here. It is simple.

Love brings the high things low and the low things high. The famous become friends with the unseen. The Creator speaks to the created. The Savior walks with the brokenhearted.



When a friend came over to my house to hang out one day, he asked me if I'd like to play basketball down the street at the elementary school.

"Sure!" I ran to my room and grabbed my basketball off the shelf. I hesitated. It was covered in signatures. For a second, I put the ball back on the shelf again and considered telling my friend that perhaps today wasn't a good day for a game. Then I threw it up in the air and smiled as I let it land on my finger and fall to the ground.

I bounced it one time on the green carpet and it came right back up into my hand. I walked into the family room where my friend was waiting and I said definitively, "Let's go play basketball." He looked at me with disbelief, but I was determined.

As I walked down the street, bouncing the ball along the way, I felt liberated. I had gone too long without a basketball to play with and without my favorite sport. Each time that I bounced the ball, another part of a signature rubbed off and I simply didn't care. My basketball had a more important purpose in my life.

That day, instead of staring at a bunch of my heroes' signatures, I spent time with my friend as we imagined that we were the heroes.

You might think that I'm a pretty good basketball player.

Nope.

I'm actually miserably bad at basketball. Nevertheless, for some reason, when I was a kid, I developed the sense that I had the potential for greatness. And, for years, this vision of greatness loomed out in front of me as though it were something that I would one day attain.



One day, in the lobby of the movie theater, where Highlands Church used to meet, I introduced myself to a father and son who had just attended one of the worship services. The dad stood up straight and tall so that his son couldn't possibly see his face. And then, the dad began to cry. I was completely disarmed and taken off guard.

He said, "We've been looking for a church for five years and today we finally found our home."

I will always remember the feeling I had that day. It was a sense of total fulfillment. Because of the steps of faith I had taken to help start a church in a strange and dusty town many miles from my home, a father and a son had finally arrived.

If you ask anyone what the most pronounced quality of Highlands Church is, they will almost always mention how loving it is. The people you meet at Highlands are always ready to stop and spend time with anyone. Quite literally, there is only one priority, "love one person at a time."

Love is the point of this journey. Love is the reason that we exist and it is the very foundation of our being. God calls us forward so that we can experience and express love to those around us. Our simple gestures of love to others and our willingness to lift others up are our most consequential acts. These small interactions, founded in a love for the strangers we encounter, are our greatest moments of glory.

When we are guided by love, the brokenhearted strangers we encounter on the desert roads of this world can provide our best chance to experience the presence of Jesus. We will never truly be able to comprehend the extent to which our faith and our love impact this world. Some of us may have a hard time believing that God can possibly use us to bless the entire world. Still, that is exactly what God says to us.

Jesus said it this way, “I assure you that whoever believes in me will do the works that I do. They will do even greater works than these because I am going to the Father.”

Jesus’ plan is for us to live lives of greatness. The plan is the same as it always has been. With a vision of blessing the entire world, we live simply and love one person at a time. Great transformative love begins with small steps of faith in the unknown desert before us.