

The Joy of Love

God's command is clear: love one another as God in Christ has loved us. This steadfast love requires much of us, even as far as laying down our lives for another. Yet this love gives much: joy, inclusion, divine and human friendship, security, deliverance, equity, justice. How can we help but make a joyful noise to God?

Focus scripture: John 15:9–17

John 15:9–17 follows last week's "I am the true vine" passage and continues to expand on the character of Christian love. This love is a joy, not a burden. However, it is not "easy" or sentimental: it requires nothing less than a willingness to lay down one's life for one's friends. To become a friend of Jesus carries a commitment, obedience to the commandment to love one another sacrificially, as Jesus has loved us (see also John 13:34). In this friendship, we make ourselves vulnerable in making ourselves known to others, as did Jesus. This vulnerability brings risk, but it also brings the promise of abiding together, of deepening our relationships. Self-revelation, in this sense, can be a form of laying down one's life for others.

Psalm 98 is an explosion of extravagant praise. It is joyful and wild. The imagery is beautifully vivid. Humanity and creation play their instruments and sing their song in celebration of God's deliverance, God's salvation (described as God's victory in *NRSV*).

This psalm has in view both the particular relationship between Israel and the LORD (a reference specifically to the Israelite deity, a name often rendered as "Yahweh"), and this same God as being universally sovereign over "the nations." Thus, a more layered, nuanced understanding of God's marvellous saving acts is required, as "victory" becomes a matter of perspective. When Israel prevails, another suffers defeat. The implications of this duality must not be lost on contemporary interpreters.

However, two important words, justice and righteousness, further shape interpretation of this psalm. God's steadfast love and faithfulness ensure that God's

justice (undifferentiated in Hebrew from "judgment") will be applied universally and equitably. The promise of this justice is a re-ordering in which both the oppressors and oppressed receive what they deserve. Furthermore, in Hebrew understanding, righteousness is not an attribute, but an act. It is to "do the right thing by" another. God, as judge, will bring justice to the marginalized and do right by those who have been abused and defeated. This is good news, indeed.

Acts 10:44–48 is the concluding episode in the story of Cornelius, which has unfolded in chapter 10. Peter is preaching to Cornelius's friends and family, whom Cornelius has gathered. Essentially repeating the eunuch's question from last week (Acts 8:36), using the same verb, hinder, Peter, asks, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people...?" The boundaries continue to be pushed outwards in the movement of the Spirit of God.

1 John 5:1–6 affirms the interrelationship between love of God, love of others, and obedience to God's commandments. In a subversion of the world's structures, that which is "victorious" in the world is not to be power or wealth or might or privilege. The victory comes via our faith, our belief.

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The command to love as God loves, as Jesus Christ loves is multi-layered in its interpretation and asks so very much of us in its application in daily life. The psalmist, however, is undaunted and sings mightily and joyfully in celebration of the enacted love of God. In our singing and praying, individually and communally, what are ways in which we can weave together exuberant expressions of praise with calls for justice and righteousness?



Focus scripture

John 15:9–17

Additional scriptures

Acts 10:44–48

Psalm 98

1 John 5:1–6

God who does marvellous things, we praise you. We lift our voices in a joyful noise, joining our song to that of creation. We give thanks for your righteousness, your steadfast love, your faithfulness, your justice. Amen.

Lecture Connection

links current events with this week's scriptures. Go to www.seasonsonline.ca and click on the link.

The Focus for Ages 3–5

Three- to five-year-olds are beginning to move beyond parallel play (playing alongside rather than with other children) to friendships based on some degree of “playing together.” Going to a specific place, like preschool or church, means anticipating seeing certain friends. They recognize that they can have different “circles of friends,” for example, neighbourhood friends, friends from school, friends from church. The Respond activities provide opportunities to draw children into this sense of a circle of friendship.

The Bible story this week creates a particular kind of friendship circle – the circle of

remembering. As the story of Jesus’ friends remembering the words of Jesus unfolds, the children are drawn into the story and into the circle of friendship through the repetition of the words “We remember!” and the ritual of placing lines and circles of paper hearts on a poster. This session offers an opportunity to affirm the friendships within the group and encourage children to expand their circles of friendship by reaching out in love to others. Pray that the children will experience inclusion in God’s encircling love in such a way that the foundation will be laid for reaching out in friendship.

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week’s focus scripture, John 15:9–17, and [biblical background](#) material (p. 69).
- ❑ Set a worship space with yellow or gold cloth, white pillar candle, matches, offering basket, Bible with a bookmark placed in this week’s focus passage from the gospel of John.
- ❑ Bring [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2), and, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 7), *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 7), *Seasons Growing Faith (SGF) Songbook*, *SGF Music CD*, CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at www.seasonsonline.ca.

Gather

- ❑ Cut out many paper circles and draw simple eyes and noses on each one; mount on craft sticks.
- ❑ Bring “Gather Round” (on resource sheet [“Additional Songs,”](#) p. 89) or song, “Sing Alleluia!” (p. 23 in *SGF Songbook*; #17 on *SGF Music CD*).
- ❑ Option: bring a puppet (see information on p. 2).

Engage

- ❑ Bring this week’s resource sheet [“Jesus’ Friends Remember”](#) and the figure of Jesus from the poster [Storytelling Resources](#).
- ❑ Bring a basket of small [paper hearts](#) (see pattern p. 90).
- ❑ Bring the “Friendship Song” (on resource sheet [“Additional Songs,”](#) p. 89).

Respond

Choose from the options provided. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **Friendship necklace:** different coloured beads with large holes, heavy cord
- ❑ **Friendship poster:** construction paper in different colours; draw a tree trunk and branches on a sheet of poster board.
- ❑ **Friendship hanger:** copies of this week’s resource sheet [“Circle of Love,”](#) plain paper plates, yarn; cut one circle for each child.

Bless

- ❑ Bring, if possible, the song “Somlandela/We Will Follow” (p. 34 *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #22 *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).



The Joy of Love

Scripture

John 15:9–17

FOCUS To imagine God's love encircling everyone, helping us to be friends

Gather

Welcome each child by name and encourage them to greet one another. Invite children to draw smiles onto the prepared circles to complete the happy faces. Have them each give their new "friend" a name and place these in the worship space.

Opening ritual

Gather around the worship space and remind children that we are in the Season of Easter. Light the candle, saying, "This candle reminds us that Jesus is always with us."

Sing "[Gather Round](#)" (p. 89) or "Sing Alleluia!" (p. 23 in *Seasons Growing Faith Songbook*; #17 on *Seasons Growing Faith Music CD*).

Pray Dear God,
thank you for Jesus,
who shows us how to be a friend.
Help us to share your love
with others. Amen.

Extinguish the candle to signal that the opening ritual has ended.

Moving into the theme

Choose one of the following:

☐ Puppet conversation

Priscilla: Hi, *(names each child)*. You are such great friends! Thinking about you makes me feel happy.

Leader: Do you know a song about being happy, Priscilla?

Priscilla: Yes I do! Do you know the song "If You're Happy"? Maybe you can all sing it with me. *(Leads the group in singing the song with different actions: clap your hands, stomp your feet, wiggle your nose...)*

Leader: Thank you, Priscilla. That was fun! What makes someone a good friend? *(Encourage responses.)*
What makes you a good friend? *(Encourage responses.)*

Priscilla: I remember that Jesus talked about being our friend.

Leader: Yes, Jesus wants us to know that he is our friend and loves us. *(Say goodbye to Priscilla.)*

☐ **Being a friend** Invite children to name some of their friends. Ask, "What makes someone a good friend?" and "What makes you a good friend?" Mention that having friends can make us feel happy. Lead the children in singing the song "If You're Happy" using the actions mentioned above.

Engage

Before the story

Invite a child to bring the Bible from the worship table and use the bookmark to open it to the gospel of John. Mention that the stories during this Easter season show us how Jesus' friends learned how to carry on Jesus' work in the world. Invite children to listen to a story about

a time when some of Jesus' friends were also remembering Jesus' friendship. Have children retrieve their happy faces from the worship space. Follow the instructions on the resource sheet "[Jesus' Friends Remember](#)" to tell the story based on **John 15:9–17**.

After the story

Sing the “[Friendship Song](#)” (p. 89).

Game Join hands in a circle. Mention that a circle reminds us that God’s love has no beginning and no end. Jesus came to help us know this wonderful love. Invite children to take turns standing in the middle while the rest of the group circles around singing the song below to the tune of “Row, Row,

Row Your Boat”:

Love, love, love our friend,
each and every day.
Show God’s love to everyone,
each and every day.

When everyone has been in the circle, encourage children to think of other people who are in God’s circle of love.

Respond

Choose from the following activities:

❑ **Friendship necklace** Jesus called everyone a friend. Invite children to make friendship necklaces by threading different coloured beads onto lengths of cord. Encourage them to name each bead for a friend and add a bead to represent Jesus. Wear the necklaces as you all sing the “[Friendship song](#)” (p. 89).

❑ **Friendship poster** Jesus shared God’s love with everyone and we can too. Trace each child’s hand (fingers apart) on a piece of construction paper, pile several sheets together and cut out so each child will have several hands. Invite children to decorate their paper hands with



crayons or markers. Help them attach their handprint leaves to the poster or a “friendship tree.” Have them take turns naming someone who is included in God’s love (include Jesus and selves).

❑ **Friendship hanger** Jesus’ circle of friends grows larger every time we share our love for God by being friends. Distribute circles from the resource sheet “[Circle of Love](#)” and invite children to colour the scene. Have them glue the circle onto a paper plate, and help them make a hanger using a hole punch and a length of yarn. Encourage children to take these home as reminders that Jesus calls us all friends.

Bless

Gather in the worship space and light the candle again. Look again at the circle of hearts. Remind children that when we share God’s love we help to make sure that all are included in the circle of God’s love.

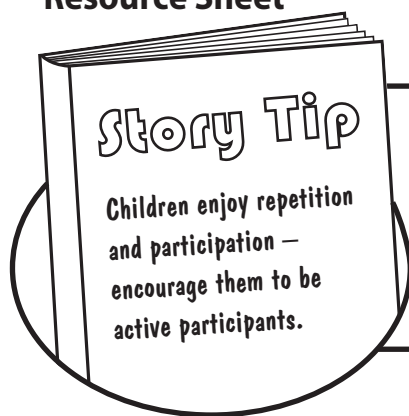
Pray Dear God,
thank you for Jesus,
who helps us know about you.
Help us to share your love with others
so that everyone is included in your circle
of love. Amen.

Sing, if possible, the song “*Somlandela/We Will Follow*” (p. 34 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #22 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).

Send each child off with this blessing, “(Child’s name), you are a friend of Jesus. Go and share God’s love with others.”

Reflect

How much do you encourage other members of the church to strengthen their support and love for families with young children? How might you continue to help children see that they are part of the wider church family?



Jesus' Friends Remember

(based on John 15:9–17)

(Sit in a circle and place the Jesus figure in the middle; have the basket of hearts nearby. Practice the response together. Invite the children to hold up their happy faces every time they say the response. Ask children to take turns helping to lay down the paper heart trails during the story.)

One day Jesus' friends were gathered around a table, sharing a meal. Jesus wasn't with them anymore and they missed him. So they decided to tell stories of Jesus. They were trying to remember all the things that Jesus had told them.

First, one friend said, "I remember all the times when Jesus told us about God's love. Jesus said that God will always love us no matter what. Do you remember?"

We remember!

Yes, they all remembered Jesus' words about God's love. *(Place some heart shapes in a line leading out from the Jesus figure.)*

Then another friend said, "I remember Jesus telling us that he would always be our friend. Do you remember?"

We remember!

Yes, they all remembered that Jesus was their friend. *(Place some more heart shapes in another line leading out.)*

Then another friend said, "I remember Jesus

saying, 'Love others in the same way that I love God.' Do you remember?"

We remember!

Yes, they all remembered that they should love each other. *(Place some more heart shapes in another line leading out.)*

Then a fourth friend said, "I remember Jesus chose us for a special job. He told us to go and do God's work in the world. Do you remember?"

We remember!

Yes, they all remembered that they should share God's love in the world *(Place some more heart shapes in another line leading out.)*

And then slowly a fifth friend said quietly, "I remember Jesus saying that sometimes it would be hard to be a follower of Jesus. Do you remember?"

We remember!

Yes, they all remembered that it wouldn't always be easy to be a friend. *(Place some more heart shapes on another line leading out.)*

One by one they all remembered their special friend Jesus. They remembered how much he loved them. They promised to keep sharing God's love. They wanted everyone to be in God's circle of love. *(Place the rest of the heart shapes to form a circle around the outer edge of all the lines; pause for a few moments to look at the pattern made by the hearts.)*

Notice how God's love is growing and growing!



Circle of Love



Additional Songs

Gathering Song

(tune: "Row, Row, Row Your Boat")

Thank you, thank you, thank you God.
Thank you for this day.
God loves you and God loves me.
We're glad we're here today.

Gather Round

(tune: "Row, Row, Row Your Boat")

Gather round the table now,
we gather round today.
Time to listen, sing, and pray,
Let's worship God today.

God's Promise

(tune: "Frère Jacques/Are You Sleeping")

(Children repeat the bolded lines.)

Listen closely. **Listen closely.**
To God's promise. **To God's promise.**
God will always love us. **God will always**
love us.
We can love too. **We can love too.**

Leaving Song

(tune: "Frère Jacques/Are You Sleeping")

(Children repeat the bolded lines.)

God is with us. **God is with us.**
As we go. **As we go.**
It is time to leave now. **It is time to leave**
now.
Go with God. **Go with God.**

Follow Me

(tune: "Frère Jacques/Are You Sleeping")

(Children repeat the bolded lines.)

I'm the shepherd. **I'm the shepherd.**
Follow me. **Follow me.**
Listen to my voice. **Listen to my voice.**
Share my love. **Share my love.**

Friendship Song

(tune: "Jesus Loves Me")

Jesus loves me and you too.
That's the good news and it's true.
Share God's love and be a friend.
Love's the gift that has no end.
Friends, join together. Friends, join
together.
Friends, join together, and share the love
of God!

Hand signs

Jesus

Place the tip of the middle finger
of the right open hand into the
left palm. Repeat the
action in reverse.

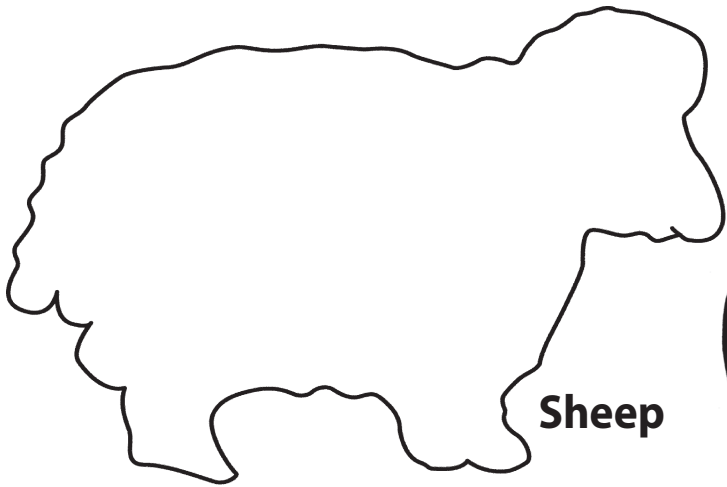


Love

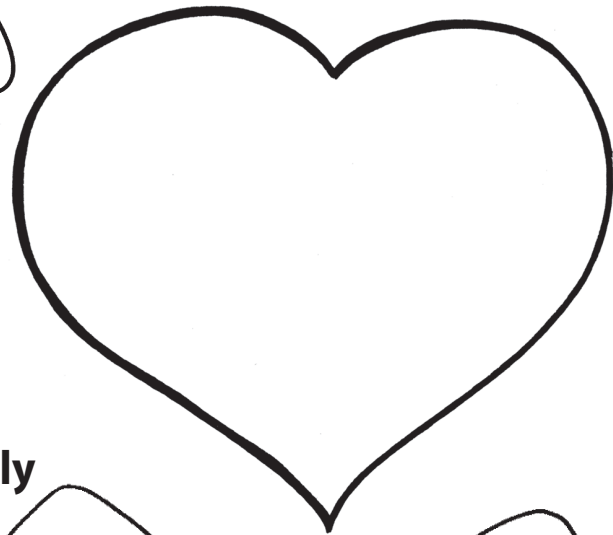
Open hands
are crossed
and pressed
to the left.



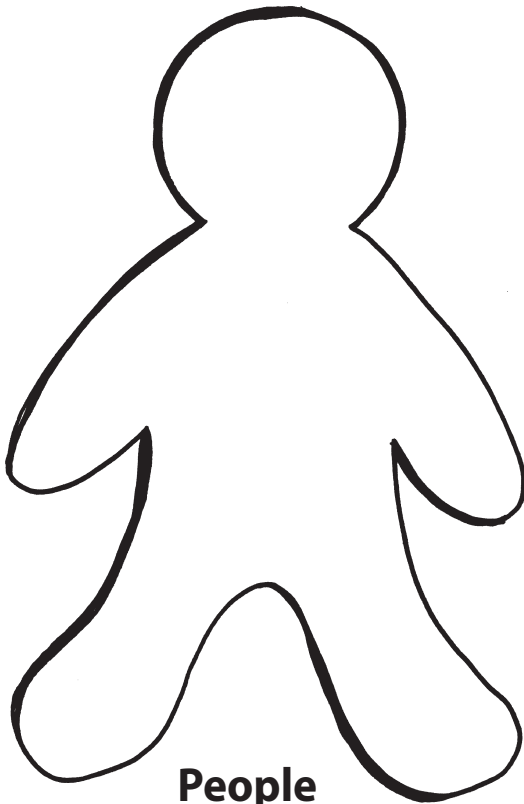
Patterns



Sheep

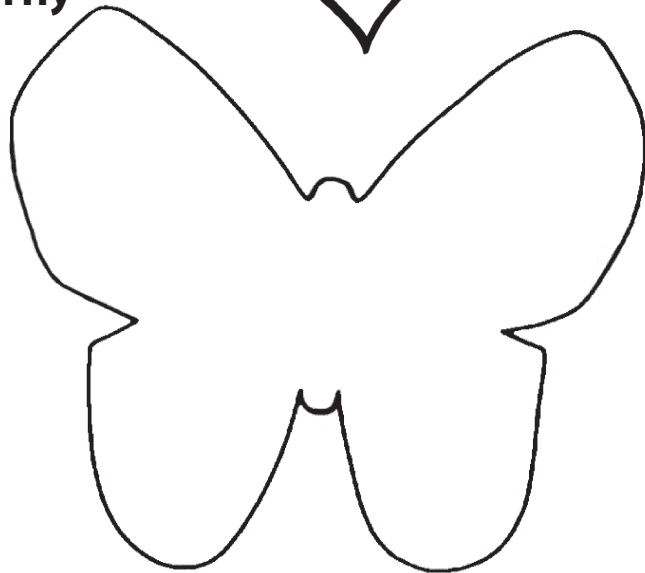


Heart



People

Butterfly



God knows me

Stars

