



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Love Is Strong
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Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love (1 Corinthians 16:13-14).

Everyone knows we live in unsettled times. There's a great deal of fear and anxiety in the air these days, in our country and around the world, and in many people's personal lives. When we're anxious and afraid we feel vulnerable, and that sense of vulnerability sends us looking for something or someone to make us feel secure.

Sometimes we put up a brave front and try to act in ways that make us look stronger, even if we don't really feel it. Some people try to be like the Wizard of Oz, who projects an image of awesome, intimidating power when people first encounter him, but then says anxiously, "Pay no attention to that little man behind the curtain," whenever anyone dares to look behind the appearances. Some try to act strong in the hope that acting will make them feel stronger. Others look around for someone else they think is strong, to protect them and keep them safe.

Over the years I've met a fair number of people who were insecure for whatever reason as children and their whole lives have been one long quest to find security. Some women, for example, seek out men who are strong in superficial ways—physically imposing, or forceful in their personality, or highly successful in their business or profession—hoping those outward signs of strength reflect the kind of person who will make them feel secure. Sometimes it does, and they find the right partner and live happily ever after. But sometimes those publicly visible signs of strength mask weakness in other areas. People who excel

in conspicuous ways may be insecure themselves, or so self-centered that they're unable to care for others and give them the security that comes from knowing they are truly loved.

Whole communities and ethnic groups, and even entire nations, when they feel anxious and afraid, often look for someone who projects great strength in the hope that that person will make them feel secure. People will sacrifice a great deal of personal freedom, first for others and then even for themselves, in exchange for calming their fears and settling their insecurities.

That's all perfectly understandable, given our human nature, but it raises at least two important questions. First, might there be different kinds of strength, such that some kinds could mislead us into thinking we're secure when we really are not; or to put it another way, can we look for security, the way some people look for love, in all the wrong places? And then, if the answer to the first question is yes, what kinds of strength really will take away our insecurity and ultimately calm our fears?

It seems clear to me that the answer to the first question is yes. People at all levels, from individuals to entire nations, often look for the wrong kind of strength to make them feel secure, only to find out later on, sometimes tragically, that what they thought was strength actually made them even less secure.

As a pastor I've seen that kind of mistake in many individuals' lives over the years. I've seen people flee from one hurtful or abusive relationship only to wind up in another,

and sometimes yet another, because they kept relying on the wrong kind of strength to give them the security they longed to find. And at the same time, I've seen people who are good at projecting certain kinds of strength as a way of manipulating others to satisfy their own narcissistic desires.

Then again, as an historian I've studied a host of instances where what people thought would make them strong ultimately led to greater misery and insecurity, from the tyrannies of the ancient world to the miscalculations that spawned the First World War to the catastrophic hopes placed in strong men like Mussolini and Hitler and Stalin and Mao.

Human beings are easily fooled when they're afraid, and there are good explanations for why that happens. Fear leads to the proverbial fight, flee, or freeze reaction, and the common denominator of all those responses is that they short circuit the critical thinking areas of the brain—for the obvious reason that in a crisis there's no time to think. In a pinch the fearful brain looks for strength and security wherever it can find them in a hurry, and the temptation to seek the wrong kind of security can be almost irresistible. That's true for individuals in abusive relationships, for groups suffering economic or social hardship, and for whole countries when they're anxious about their national security. Psychology texts and history books are full of stories about how that happens.

And that brings us to the second question. If there really are different kinds of strength, and people are tempted to look for security in all the wrong places, what kinds of

strength are more likely to calm our fears and offer us the security we really want?

Obviously there are practical needs that have to be met in order for people to feel secure. People who are hungry, or “food insecure” as the current expression says, need access to food they can afford. People who are unemployed or underemployed but able to work need jobs that pay a living wage, or temporary support until they can find a decent job. People who are sick need health care. Individuals and groups who suffer discrimination or oppression need justice. And nations that are threatened by other nations, or anyone else who wants to harm them, need reasonable protections for their national security.

All those things are obvious, and a good society will do its best to help people meet their basic needs. But there’s another source of strength and security that’s often overlooked, and it’s a central claim of the Christian faith: namely, that one of the strongest powers in all creation is love, and those who learn to love well are among the strongest people in the world.

The kind of love we’re talking about here, what the Bible calls *agape* in Greek, has nothing to do with the qualities of the one who is loved—whether that person is cute or attractive or friendly or nice—but depends solely on the heart of the one who loves. *Agape* is the kind of love God has for us, a love we receive not because we’re so lovable, but simply because God is loving.

Agape, or what we’ll just call “love” for now, wants what’s best for others, and does all it can to build up and

support and empower them. This kind of love is not just a bunch of sentiments or platitudes. Love wants to know what is needed to make things right, then it rolls up its sleeves and works hard to do what needs to be done.

Love is very strong. It's the strength that raises children and provides for them, no matter what they need or how challenging their situation might be. Love is the strength that cares for others when it would be so much easier to look the other way and not care at all. Love works toward justice for everyone, even if there's no immediate benefit for the one who loves. Love breaks down walls of hostility and seeks reconciliation where only conflict has gone before. Love tries to understand where others are coming from, and so it listens sincerely, though it always wants to know the truth and recognizes the need for people to change their minds when the truth demands it. Love musters the courage to sacrifice for family or friends or country, or even for the world as a whole.

The Bible tells us that God is love, and of course God is also unimaginably strong. God is strong enough to bring all of creation into being. God guides the stars and the planets in their orbits and unleashes the forces of nature. God is the ground of being itself, the author of this life and the hope of life everlasting. Nothing and no one is stronger than God, and yet God is love. This means, among other things, that love and strength go together, and insofar as we human beings are made in the image of God, the source of our greatest strength lies in God, and in the love that God has for us and commands us to have for one another.

Love is the kind of strength that ultimately meets our security needs, and it begins by driving out much of the fear that makes us insecure in the first place. “Perfect love casts out fear,” the Bible says. Think of people who have done great things out of love, from parents who care for special needs children to civil rights workers who campaign for justice to soldiers who sacrifice life and limb for the love of their country. Martin Luther King Jr. preached the power of love to reconcile those who are divided by race or class or any other barrier that comes between them. Love casts out fear, in part, because it directs our focus beyond ourselves, and fear is strongest when we’re most preoccupied with ourselves and what might happen to us.

Of course, the more we love other people the more we might be afraid of what could happen to them too. But here again, love is strong because it drives us to do what needs to be done. Parents go to great lengths to see that their children have what they need. People who are afraid of what might happen to minorities or others that society neglects or disparages are motivated by love to look out for those people, and the strength of their love can inspire others to act as well.

Love is strong because God is love, and there is no power in all creation stronger than the love of God. And love makes us strong for another reason too, which is that God loves us. If we’re feeling insecure for lack of love, no love is more secure than the love God has for us. If we’re insecure because we’re afraid we don’t measure up, God has the power to make all things new, and God will love us all through the process of making us into a new creation. And if we’re afraid of losing life itself, even if we’re afraid of death,

there's more good news: only God has the power to raise up the dead, and the God who loves us in Jesus Christ has promised to do just that.

Love is strong for all sorts of reasons, and it never lets us down the way other sources of strength will fail us in the end. So let's never underestimate the power of love. If we remember how strong love is, we'll be less tempted to look for security in all the wrong places; and in fact we'll be stronger and more secure, not only in the end, but all the days of our lives.



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