

IT'S TIME TO LOVE

Week #5 of a 6-Week Series, "It's Time"

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Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: So I mentioned a few weeks back that I bought a new car; I bought a Subaru. I'm a first-time Subaru owner. And so many people – when they find that out, or if they're driving one or they know – they've been telling me, *"Oh, Subaru people love Subarus!"* They're loyal to Subaru; once they have a Subaru, they never leave Subaru. And so I owned a Lexus for 20 years, and that was pretty good. But so far, I love Subaru, too! *[Congregation laughs]*

And the thing is, it's not just the car performance; what I love is how much work and effort they put into to helping you love your Subaru and keep loving it! *[Congregation laughs]* Loving the whole Subaru experience. They actually have a program entitled, "The Love Encore" program. I think that's a weird title; I'd call it, "I Love My Subaru" program. But I get the point of it.

And what they do is: They want you to love it as much as you did when you drove off their ... what do they call that place? *[Congregants yell out, "Lot!"]* Their lot. Yeah! *[Laughs with congregation]* And so, what they do is: They call you after a couple of weeks, and they say, *"Hey; we'd like to set up an appointment. There are all different kinds of technologies and different features; we want to walk you through it. And you're more than welcome to read through the 140-page manual, if you like, but we're happy to help."* And they will spend a couple of hours with you. And they will even do it over time. Like, there's any time ... There's literally a "love encore specialist" that's available to help all the time.

So I drove up, and then – when I drove up – as soon as I pulled in, the manager came right out to the car to say, *"Hi."* My love encore specialist came; he sat in the car. First thing, he turned to me and he said, *"I know you."* I said, *"Really?"* He said, *"Yeah; I go to Unity."* He said, *"I love the church."* He said, *"But I work on Sundays, so I don't get to do it, and I'm really happy to help you."*

So he went through, and he was fabulous and wonderful. The session was great. And at the end of the session, he said, *"So, Rev., I know that you love jokes."* *[Congregation laughs]* *"So I would be remiss if I didn't end our session by telling you a joke."* *[Congregation laughs]*

So he told me the joke. And I knew the joke, but I didn't say I knew the joke, because he was so nice and thoughtful to even do that. And he told it well, and I actually laughed. And so here's the interesting thing that I thought: is that he said, *"I know you love jokes."* He didn't say, *"I really love your jokes."* *[Congregation laughs]* He said, *"I know you love jokes."* I think he meant to say that, though! *[Laughs with congregation]*

But the bottom line is: At the end of it, you know what? I felt loved. I felt valued. I felt cherished. I felt appreciated. And you could say, *"Well, that's just good customer service!"* You could just say, *"Well, heck; you're his minister! He might have kicked up the niceness up a notch or two."* But the fact is – the bottom line is: I felt loved. I felt cared for. And I felt valued and appreciated.

Today we're talking about love. Because at the heart of it, we all want to feel loved. We all want to feel valued and cherished, whether it's at a car dealership or in a relationship or in our work. We want all to feel love.

So this week, I couldn't think of a joke. So I'm going to tell you the joke that Bert, my love encore specialist, told me. This is what he actually told me. He said:

A man's walking along a beach in Florida, and he stumbles across an old lamp. And he picks it up and he rubs it, and a genie pops out. And he said, *"Wow! You mean this genie thing's for real?"*

The genie says, *"Yeah, except the deal is: You only get one wish, so think carefully."*

And so the guy thinks for a while, and he says, *"Well, you know, I've always wanted to go to Hawaii. I'm scared to fly, and I'm kind of sea sick, so I wouldn't do a cruise or anything. So could you build me a bridge to Hawaii so I can drive and visit there whenever I feel like it?"*

And the genie said, *"What?"* He said, *"Man, that's impossible! Can you think of all of the logistics involved in that? Can you think about all the supports, and how deep into the Pacific they'd have to go to the bottom? Can you think of all the concrete and the steel? That is too much, man; too much! So, no; you're going to have to think of something else that you really want."*

And so the guy thinks, and then he says, *"Well, you know, my other wish would be: I really want to understand women. I want to know what they feel inside; I want to know what they're thinking, especially when they give me the silent treatment. I want to know why they're crying; I want to know what they want, even when I ask and they say nothing. I wish I knew how to love a woman, and how to truly make a woman happy."*

And the genie said, *"Would you like that bridge with two lanes or four lanes?"* [Laughs with congregation]

And, you know, the thing about that joke is: At some level, it's pointing to the fact that love isn't easy. When you look around at the world, it shows that we aren't always great at love. At the divorce rate. You know, the fact that families have conflict and are estranged from each other. And the fact that, sometimes, friends get into an argument and they never talk to each other again. Or the levels of hate that we have in our world. The levels of racism and homophobia and misogyny. You know, the violence, the abuse, the murder, the wars. I could go on! But I think all of it point to the fact that, as a human family, we don't exactly live Jesus' commandment to love one another as effectively as we could.

I want you to think about the amount of love in your life right now. Think about the love that you feel, the level of love you experience, and the amount of love you express. And I ask you: How many people know that, regardless of what that amount is right now, you know there's a greater capacity of love for you and in you than you're currently experiencing right now? There's more love in you than you've got in your life right now?

How many people have someone in your life – and you know they love you! You know they love you, but they don't exactly show and demonstrate and express their love in the greatest way. Anybody have somebody like that? And how many people have someone in your life that you're not as connected to, and you have a hard time showing them your love and your care for them? Anybody have somebody like that?

You know, it is absolutely true: Love is not an easy thing to master and demonstrate consistently in our lives. And yet, the Bible resoundingly says how important love is in life. The greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. The second is to love others as ourselves. You know, Jesus said that, *"My new commandment is that you love one another as I have loved you."* He said, *"You will know my disciples by how they love one another."*

Paul said that love is the fulfilling of the Law. Paul said that you can have knowledge of mysteries and all of the possessions in the world, but if you have not love, you have nothing. And he also said, *"Faith, hope and love; these three remain. But the greatest of these is love."*

The Book of John says, *"God is love."* So if it's true what it says in Genesis – that we're all created in the image and likeness of God – and God is love, that means that we are created in the image and likeness of love. That we are created here to love, to experience love, and express love. Love is the thing that fulfills all of God's laws and spiritual laws, and it's the thing that fulfills our lives.

So if we want to have a better life – a more fulfilling life – it's time to love. It's time to learn how to love on a deeper level. So we're going to look at the three things that it's going to take for us to love at a deeper level.

And the first one is to **OPEN OUR HEARTS**. You know, when it comes to love, as much as we love and desire it, I think at some level we're afraid of love. Afraid to get hurt. Afraid to get rejected. Afraid our heart will be broken. Afraid that it will not be reciprocated in a way. And the universal response to our fear of love is that we close our hearts. It is like this defense mechanism and an inner impulse to self-protect. We close off our hearts, because we do not want to get hurt. And particular in matters of love.

We close our hearts to what has happened in the past. We close our hearts to anticipated hurt in the future. But you know what we even close our heart to? When we have too much love in our lives! Have you ever felt so much love it kind of scared you? That it almost overwhelmed you to feel that much love? That you felt kind of vulnerable? Felt almost out of control? And we close off our hearts when we feel too much love.

I had a bunch of friends; we did this little MasterMind thing. I was telling them how much I loved them, and all this. And we all felt so much love! And we're like, "*Man!*" We had no idea what to do, so we just punched each other in the arm [*congregation laughs*] and said ... Really! We punch each other in the arm; it's like, "*You goofball!*" Walked away, because we didn't know what to do with that much love!

So I ask you: Where in your life is your heart closed? Where in your life are you maybe not loving as fully and deeply and freely as you could live? Sometimes we would rather keep our heart closed than risk opening our heart to love. But I'll tell you: It's a greater risk keeping your heart closed. It's a greater risk to our happiness, to our peace, and a level of joy and fulfillment. Somebody once said, "*The heart is like an umbrella; it tends to work better when it's open.*"

Let me ask a question right now. Just check in with yourself, and ask yourself the question: Is my heart open right now? Or is it closed in some way? To someone?

Listen to the words of Scripture and what they say about the power and the importance of the heart. In Matthew, it says, "*Love God with all your heart.*" In Proverbs: "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart.*" In Jeremiah: "*If you seek me, you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart.*"

To say "all your heart" – to love God, trust God with all your heart, seek God with all your heart – it means your whole heart. And to do it whole-heartedly means to do it with an open heart. Many other Scriptures about heart! The Beatitudes said, "*Blessed are the pure in heart.*" Psalm 51 says, "*Create in me a clean heart, O, Lord.*" Why? Because we know the importance of having an open heart.

One of my favorites is in Proverbs, and it's such a powerful truth. It says, "*Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.*" Guard your heart, that it is pure and clean, because everything you do will flow from it. The prerequisite to love deeper – to love in a greater and more profound and fulfilling way – is to open your heart.

How many people have heard of HeartMath? Anybody? So they do studies about heart intelligence: heart coherence. And one of the things it says is that we have the power to open our hearts. And it's a three-step thing; it's like only a two-minute meditation practice. But opening your heart and practicing is an important thing. I kind of go a little quicker than the two minutes, but here's what it is.

The first one is just to take a deep breath and relax and let go. So let's just do that one. Everyone take a deep breath. Relax. And just consciously open your heart, and breathe into your heart space. Again; take another breath. And just feel what it's like to have your heart open. Feel how light, how peaceful you are. And just open your heart.

The second one is to feel a level of love and appreciation for something or anything. That, when your heart's open, just feel some love and appreciation. And whether it's for a spouse, or a child, or a family member ... Whether it's for a puppy, or nature, or a beach or your home or a sunset ... Or ice cream ... or bacon ... [*Congregation laughs*] Whatever it is!

So it's a deep breath and open your heart. And now feel a sense of love and appreciation for something in your life.

And then the last one is just to affirm your openness to love. “*My heart is open, and I am open to love.*” Half-voice together: *[with congregation]* “*My heart is open, and I am open to love.*” Deep breath. Again, half voice: *[with congregation]* “*My heart is open, and I am open to love.*” Deep breath. Just that little practice of opening your heart gets us back to our true nature, which is peace. Which is loving. Which opens ourselves to wisdom and understanding and compassion and solutions and creativity. I mean, it opens us to stay more grounded and centered, and be less pulled by fear and doubt and anxiety.

Again, the Bible reminds us: “*Open your heart.*” “*Trust God with all your heart.*” “*Love God with all your heart.*” “*Seek God with all your heart.*” Which is a resounding reminder that the most powerful thing you can do to love and for love is to practice opening your heart.

The second one is to **LOVE YOURSELF**. You know, usually when you think of “*Love yourself,*” it sounds nice. It sounds cute. Maybe it sounds weird; maybe it sounds selfish, egotistical, narcissistic. Alan Cohen, the great spiritual writer, says loving yourself is the first and foremost responsibility for us. The first and foremost responsibility! Because, if we can’t love ourselves fully, we absolutely limit our ability to experience, to feel and express love.

So my question for you is: What does loving yourself mean to you? What would loving yourself more look like for you? How good would you say you are at loving yourself? In what ways are you not loving yourself as well as you possibly could? And in what are of your life right now could you use some more of your own love?

There’s a wonderful poem I use in my prosperity class called, “Time Somebody Told Me.” It’s by a guy named by Quantedius Hall. And here’s how it goes:

*Time Somebody Told Me
That I am lovely, good and real
That I am beautiful inside
If they only knew
How that would make me feel.*

*Time Somebody Told Me
That my mind is quick, sharp
And full of wit
That I should keep on trying
And never quit.*

*Time Somebody Told Me
How they loved and needed me
How my smile is filled with hope
And my spirit sets them free
How my eyes shine, full of light
How good they feel when they hug me tight.*

*Time Somebody Told Me
So, I had a talk with myself
Just me, nobody else
‘cause it was time
Somebody Told Me*

So my question is: What are the things you tell yourself about yourself? Are the things that you tell yourself about yourself – are they kind and caring? Are they supportive and encouraging? Are they loving and appreciative? What do you tell you about you?

You know, loving yourself is more than just giving yourself a spa day ... although that’s a lovely thing! Or going on a regular vacation. Doing those things – those are important. But if you go to the depths of

what loving yourself means, it is about making peace and truly accepting who we are fully. It is about appreciating and valuing ourselves. It's about enjoying being who we are, and being true to ourselves.

You know, the more we love ourselves, the more love we have to give to others. And the healthier our love is for ourselves, the healthier the love we can give others. And this whole idea to love yourself is to do that same practice we did of opening your heart. But instead of appreciating and loving something or someone else, it's appreciating and loving something about you.

So everyone, take a deep breath now. And what is one thing you love and appreciate about you? What do you love and like about you? What are you proud and happy about to be you? And can you appreciate you? Your gifts, your talents, your ability? The difference that you make? You are the temple of God! And so it's important to love and appreciate your temple. Your body. Your smile. That vehicle that allows you to live this amazing and wonderful life.

And then to just say a little thing: *"I love myself right where I am."* You know, *"I love myself in this moment and every moment."* And the reason I think it's important to say and meditate some of that, because sometimes we only love ourselves when we're on our "A-Game." When we're proud and doing great things. But we're not so much in love with ourselves when we mess up. When we're having a bad hair day to boot. *[Congregation laughs]*

And it sounds silly ... You know, I have a prayer partner, and one of the things she says, like when I'm having a tough time, and I've kind of unloaded and shared with her, she always says, *"Buddy, I love you right where you are. I love you right there."* Because sometimes it's hard to love yourself right there when you're messing up, or things aren't working well. And it's a reminder to all of us to love ourselves, and to love ourselves all the time.

The thing about loving ourselves: It makes us feel good – more connected with who we are – but it also creates us to a greater open channel for love to flow through us. To ourselves and others.

And the final one to love in greater ways is to **DO THE WORK OF LOVE**. Love takes work! And we've got to do the work of love if we want to expand and experience greater love. And there are two things that make love hard.

The first one is that people feel and express and like and receive love in different ways. We're not all the same! Anybody ready or heard of the book, *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman? And the whole point of it is that we all express and receive love in different ways.

Here are the five love languages. Words of affirmation. That's an expression of love: to say things that are complimentary. That are validating. That are uplifting, encouraging, to make someone feel cherished and appreciated.

And the second one is quality time: to spend time together, whether it's talking or hiking or going for a walk or playing a game or watching a movie. Time together and being present with each other absolutely makes a difference. And also gives us one of the greatest gifts in life, and that is to receive someone's undivided attention. Quality time is a powerful expression of love.

The third one is acts of service: to do any nice thing for someone. You know, maybe cook them a meal, or help them out in a situation. There are all kinds of acts of service that are really nice that is an expression of love.

Number four is gifts. And whether it's flowers and a card and a gift ... little tokens of appreciation and expression is a great language of love.

And the final one is touch: physical affection. You know, whether it's caressing or holding hands, or a punch in the arm from a guy *[congregation laughs]* ... Whatever it is, those acts of physical affection actually make us feel closer. Our hearts really open.

And the interesting thing is that different people have different kinds. So, like, suppose you gave some flowers to someone who likes words of appreciation. They may not feel as loved and connected. And suppose you say words of appreciation, but somebody really likes physical touch. I mean, you can see!

And so here's the message I think the book has: Is that, for you really to love effectively, you've got to think deeply. Pay attention and think about what's meaningful and important for the other person. Sometimes we like to do it the way we do it. Somebody once said, *"When you're hammer, you think everything looks like a nail."* [Congregation laughs] What that meaning is, like, we think, *"Well, I mean love, and this is the way I express my love."* But if we want to go to a deeper level of love, we need to think about what the other person likes.

And sometimes we get stuck in our own rut. So love is calling us to expand ourselves. To see people differently. To do things differently. And it's not easy! Because sometimes we like staying in our comfort zone. But love is calling us to expand and express. And it takes work!

The second reason love takes work is: When people are not nice, and we mess up, sometimes it's hard to keep our hearts open! It's hard to love someone when you feel hurt or you feel betrayed. Sometimes it's hard to love ourselves when we do something stupid. I mean, the Bible says: *"Love your enemies."* And what it's saying is: Keep your heart open, even when the behavior you or another person demonstrate isn't as good as you want.

And just do that same practice: Opening your heart and appreciating others and yourself. You might not be at the place to appreciate the other person, but then we need to go to the prayer, *"Create in me a clean heart, O, Lord."*

Anybody remember what Solomon asked for when God asked what he wanted? Okay, I'll help you out! [Congregation laughs] He wanted an understanding heart. Because sometimes if you have someone in your life, and it's not clicking, maybe just pray – not just for a clean heart – but an understanding heart. Because that puts us in a place to go back to that practice of opening our heart and being able, from our heart, to send that person love and peace and blessings. And knowing that things will work out okay.

Love takes work! And if you want a better life, we need to be willing to do the work of love. And what happens is, inevitably, your heart's going to close again. And like the shampoo bottle says, *"Wash, rinse, repeat."* [Congregation laughs] So when you mess up on working the love thing – and it doesn't work, and your heart closes – go back to number one: Open your heart. Open your heart to yourself. And do the work of love.

Your heart's going to close. Let me give you an example. It's just part of the deal! Anybody ever meditate and your mind wanders? Anybody? Ever happen? Like almost all the time? [Congregation laughs] Well, in the same way the mind wanders in meditation, quieting your mind, that the heart closes. And the same way your mind wanders, and you have to keep opening your mind ... the same thing with your heart. Nobody's heart is open all the time! It's work! It's spiritual work: the greatest spiritual work to do.

And so don't get mad if your heart closes again ... because it's built-in protective. But we can override it with love. And so we have to keep doing the work. You know: wash, rinse, repeat. Wash, rinse, repeat. It's just a cycle. Nobody gets to that place where your heart's open 24/7, or at least I haven't met them yet. And it's an important work for us.

Emmet Fox says the most powerful energy and force in the universe is love. And we could get to that place of mastering love, of expressing love in greater ways, we would be the happiest and most powerful beings in the world.

Open your heart. If the only thing you get from this is that little practice – to go to your heart and open it; to feel love and appreciation; and to affirm, *"I am open to love"* – it will change your life. Do not

underestimate the power of opening your heart. Because, as Scripture says: Love with all your heart, trust with all your heart, seek God with all your heart. It means: Open your heart all the time.

Your heart has an intelligence that will guide you. Just your job is opening it. Keep opening it. Keep opening it.

Open your heart. Love yourself. Do the work of love. It isn't easy stuff, but it is the thing that makes life fulfilling. If you want a better life, it's time. It's time to love.

God bless you all!

[Congregation applauds]

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