

Love That Crosses Every Line

Fear of the Other—and the Love That Drives It Out

Jonah 4:1-11; 1 John 4:16-21; Matthew 5:43-45

In the series “Fearless: Overcoming Fear with Faith”

One thing I’ve noticed over the years is this: moms have an incredible ability to love their own children through almost anything.

Your child spills juice all over the kitchen floor?

“Oh sweetheart, it’s okay.”

Somebody else’s child spills juice?

“Well... that’s a lot.”

Your child is “creative.”

Other children are “chaotic.”

We laugh because we recognize something true in ourselves.

We naturally move toward what feels familiar... and away from what feels uncomfortable, unfamiliar, or difficult.

And that’s not just true with children. It’s true with people.

The closer someone feels to us, the easier it is to love them. The more distant they feel, the easier it becomes to misunderstand them... avoid them... fear them... or quietly write them off.

And we are living in a time shaped by fear of “the other.”

People are divided politically. Generations don’t understand each other. People distrust institutions, media, neighbors, immigrants, conservatives, liberals, Christians, non-Christians—you name it.

Most people don’t wake up in the morning wanting to hate anybody.

But fear rarely starts as hatred.

It usually starts as distance.

People stop being human beings... and start becoming categories.

“Them.”

“Those people.”

“People like that.”

And that’s exactly what today’s Scriptures confront.

The story of Jonah is far more than a story about a fish.

By the time we get to chapter 4, we finally discover what Jonah has been afraid of all along. God has shown mercy to Nineveh—and Jonah is furious.

He says to God:

“This was precisely my point!... I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God...”

Jonah’s problem wasn’t that he doubted God’s power.

Jonah’s problem was that he could not accept God’s compassion for people he had already decided were outside the circle of concern.

Nineveh represented everything Jonah hated and feared: violence, oppression, enemies, danger.

Jonah wanted grace for himself... while wanting limits on grace for others.

He wanted a God who punished enemies. But God kept loving them.

And before we judge Jonah too quickly... we should admit we understand him better than we’d like.

Because we do this too.

We reduce people into categories. Liberals. Conservatives. Immigrants. Boomers. Gen Z. Urban people. Rural people. Rich people. Poor people.

Fear simplifies people into categories. But love sees human beings.

There's a powerful modern example of this in the life of Daryl Davis.

Daryl Davis is a Black musician who spent years intentionally building relationships with members of the Ku Klux Klan. Now think about that for a moment.

He didn't excuse racism. He didn't pretend hatred was okay.

But he believed something important: it's harder to hate people once you actually know them.

Over time, more than 200 people left the Klan after building relationships with him. Not because he screamed at them. Not because he humiliated them. But because he kept seeing them as human beings even when they expected hatred in return.

Fear says: "Stay away."

Love says: "Move closer and see the person."

And Jonah couldn't do that.

God appoints a plant to give Jonah shade. Jonah loves the plant. Then the plant dies—and Jonah grieves it deeply.

And God asks him: "You're this upset over a plant... but not over an entire city full of people?"

Jonah mourned the loss of his comfort more than the possible loss of human lives.

And if we're honest... we sometimes do the same thing.

We protect our comfort, our assumptions, our political tribes, our familiar worlds more fiercely than we protect relationships.

The moment we stop seeing people as people, fear has already won.

Jonah shows us the fear. Then Jesus tells us what to do with it.

In Matthew 5, Jesus says something that still sounds shocking today:

“Love your enemies and pray for those who harass you.”

Now let’s be clear about what Jesus is *not* saying.

Jesus is not saying: ignore evil, pretend abuse is okay, remove healthy boundaries, or act like injustice doesn’t matter.

That’s not love. And that’s not wisdom.

But Jesus is saying: don’t let fear turn into hatred. Don’t let conflict erase someone’s humanity. Don’t let anger become the thing that shapes your heart.

Because once fear controls the heart, love becomes impossible. And Jesus refuses to let fear have the final word.

He says: love your enemies. Pray for those who hurt you.

Why?

Because this is how children begin to resemble their Father.

God gives sun and rain even to people who don’t deserve it. And Jesus says: that’s what love looks like.

Love is not agreement.

Love is choosing not to let fear decide how you see or treat another person.

Jesus never said enemies stop being enemies.

He said they stop being less than human.

And honestly, this kind of love sounds beautiful... but it also sounds impossible.

How do you love difficult people? How do you pray for people who frustrate you? How do you refuse fear when the world feeds it to you every single day?

That's where 1 John comes in.

1 John says:

“God is love... and perfect love casts out fear.”

The gospel does not merely soften our behavior. It reorders our hearts.

John is not saying followers of Jesus never feel afraid. He is saying we no longer have to live controlled by fear—because we already know we are loved by God.

That changes everything.

Because when you no longer have to prove your worth, defend your identity, protect yourself at all costs, or earn your value—you become free to love people you once feared.

Fear builds walls.

Love crosses lines.

Fear says: protect yourself first.

Love says: see the human being standing in front of you.

Fear says: “They are the enemy.”

Love says: “They are still made in the image of God.”

And John goes even further:

“Those who say, ‘I love God,’ but hate their brothers or sisters, are liars.”

That's strong language. Because John understands something important: invisible love for God becomes visible love for people.

We do not love in order to become loved.

We love because we already are loved.

Grace always moves first.

And maybe that's why Mother's Day connects so deeply to this message.

The book of Isaiah asks a striking question:

"Can a mother forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you."

Most mothers don't stop loving when things get hard. They move toward. Even when it costs them.

We can see that kind of love in some of the stories coming out of the southern border right now.

Over the last few years, a group of Christian women who call themselves "Women of Welcome"—many of them moms and grandmothers from churches a lot like ours—have been making trips to the U.S.–Mexico border. They grew up hearing a lot of the same things many of us have heard: "Be careful. Those people are dangerous. They're coming to take our jobs. They don't respect our laws." Immigrants and asylum seekers became a category—"illegals"—not people with names and faces.

But these women began to feel unsettled. They loved their own children deeply, and they started asking, "What would I do if my kids were in danger? What would I risk if my family had no safe place to live?" So, instead of just talking about it from a distance, they decided to go and see.

They visited shelters and makeshift camps where families were sleeping in tents or on concrete floors. They met mothers who had walked hundreds of miles with toddlers and teenagers—leaving behind homes, jobs, and everything familiar—because gangs had threatened their children, or war had gotten too close, or poverty had become absolutely crushing.

One woman shared how she sat with a mom who was about her age, holding a little girl about the same age as her own daughter. They didn't share a language, but they shared pictures on their phones. One side of the table: photos of school concerts, birthday parties, a child's first day of kindergarten. The other side of the table: photos of the same, plus pictures of the home they had to flee and the family members who didn't survive the journey.

And this Christian mom said, "In that moment, I realized: I'm not looking at an issue. I'm looking at myself. I'm looking at a mother who loves her children exactly the way I love mine. The only difference is where we were born."

Fear says, "Stay away. They are the problem." Love—especially a mother's kind of love—says, "Move closer. Listen. See the person. If I were in her shoes, I would do anything to protect my kids too."

These women still care about laws and safety. They're not naïve. But they refuse to let fear have the last word. They come home from these trips saying, "I can't just think of 'immigrants' anymore. I think of Maria. I think of her children. I think of the mothers who are just trying to keep their kids alive."

That's what happens when love crosses lines. People stop being categories... and start becoming neighbors.

In a world that keeps telling us to divide into camps and fear “those people,” that kind of love is a powerful witness. It looks a lot like the God Isaiah describes the God who says, “Even if a mother could forget her child, I will not forget you.” And when we know that God has already moved toward us like that, we are free to move toward others the world tells us to fear.

We see that kind of fierce, line-crossing love all through the Bible.

There’s a Canaanite mother in the Gospels, a Gentile woman with a daughter nobody knew how to help. Her child is tormented, and every barrier is stacked against her—wrong ethnicity, wrong religion, wrong gender, wrong side of the tracks. The disciples want her sent away. The crowd would rather ignore her. But that mama’s love refuses to back down. She pushes through the silence, through the discouragement, through every ‘you don’t belong here,’ and she keeps pleading for her child. And in the end, Jesus doesn’t shame her; he honors her. He says, “Great is your faith,” and her daughter is healed.

There’s a young widow named Ruth, a Moabite, who is supposed to stay an outsider. When her husband dies, the sensible thing would be to go home, start over, find safety with her own people. But Naomi—older, bitter, empty-handed—has no one. Ruth looks at this grieving mother-in-law and says, “I’m not leaving you. Where you go, I’ll go. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God.” She crosses borders, languages, and prejudice to love one hurting woman well. And God weaves that outsider’s love right into the family line of Jesus.

There’s a woman in the house of a Pharisee, a woman with a reputation everybody knows and nobody lets her forget. She isn’t supposed to be in the

room with the religious leaders. She isn't supposed to touch a respected teacher. But love and gratitude pull her past their stares and whispers. She bends down, weeping, washing Jesus' feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. The religious people see a problem. Jesus sees a person. He lifts her up as an example of great love and says, "Your sins are forgiven."

And it doesn't stop there. A Samaritan woman at a well talks with Jesus in the heat of the day and ends up running back to town to tell everybody what he has done. A teenage girl named Mary says yes to an unthinkable calling and bears the Son of God into a world that will misunderstand her. A group of women stand at the cross when most of the men have run, and they are the first ones at the empty tomb, carrying the news of resurrection to the rest of the disciples.

Over and over again, God works through women—mothers and daughters, widows, and outsiders—who refuse to let fear draw the circle small. They step over the lines their world has drawn, because love has already stepped over every line for them.

These women give us a glimpse of the very heart of God.

So what does this mean for us this week?

First: name your Nineveh.

Who feels difficult, frustrating, threatening, or distant to you? Maybe it's political. Maybe it's personal. Maybe it's someone who hurt you deeply.

Maybe it's a whole group of people you instinctively distrust.

Second: ask an honest question.

Is this truly discernment? Or is it self-protection disguised as righteousness? Jonah thought he was defending what was right. But he was really resisting compassion.

Third: pray differently.

Not: “God, fix them.” But: “God, help me see them as human.” That’s a very different prayer.

Fourth: practice one costly act of goodwill.

Send the message. Make the call. Listen instead of assuming. Choose curiosity over outrage. Move one step toward instead of away. Because the people we fear most are often the people we know least.

Fifth: Let God’s love shape how you see people.

This week, intentionally spend time with someone who is different from you — politically, culturally, racially, socially, or personally. Instead of assuming the worst, ask: *What might it look like to see this person through the eyes of God’s compassion instead of my fear?* Fear builds walls. Love builds tables. Every time we choose compassion over suspicion, listening over labeling, or kindness over contempt, we practice the fearless love of Christ. And over time, that kind of love reshapes not only our relationships — it reshapes us.

Imagine what kind of church we could become... if fear didn’t get the final word. A place where people don’t have to agree about everything to love one another. A place where outsiders feel welcomed. A place where compassion is stronger than suspicion. A place where love crosses every line.

And in a world increasingly shaped by fear... what a witness that would be. A people who refuse to let fear have the final word. A people who keep

moving toward others with compassion. A people shaped not by outrage, suspicion, or resentment... but by love.

And in a world increasingly shaped by fear... what a witness it would be to become people shaped by love.

Because the opposite of fear is not just bravery. The deepest opposite of fear... is love.

And here's the good news today:

You do not have to manufacture that kind of love on your own.

The gospel begins here:

God has already loved you first.

Before you figured life out... before you got everything right... before you even knew how to love God back...

God loved you. Completely. Patiently. Faithfully.

And when you know you are deeply loved by God, something begins to change.

Fear loses some of its grip. Walls begin to come down.

Enemies begin to look more like neighbors.

So today, the invitation is simple:

Receive the love God already has for you, as you are: a beloved and worthy child of God. *(pause)*

And then let that love shape the way you see other people. Amen.