Free from Earning, Free to Love
Luke 10:38–42 / 1 John 4:7–12 (MSG)

When Love Feels Heavy

If we were to summarize the Christian faith in one sentence, it would be this: *Love God, love your neighbor.* That's how central love is. As we heard in today's reading from 1 John, *"Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."* God is love, and the way we come to know the God of love is by loving.

But knowing that doesn't make it easy. Sometimes love feels heavy. It becomes a burden when the command to love turns into nothing more than a duty we must perform. Think about it. Is it easy to love a selfish coworker? Or a neighbor who constantly makes noise at midnight? Or those who hold power and create chaos, injustice and evil in the world? It isn't. And yet, Scripture says, *"Love them."* We can't ignore it, but when we try, it can feel exhausting.

However, love becomes even heavier when we start believing it is something we must *earn.* Parents, for example, want to love all their children equally, but that doesn't always happen. When one child is hurt in an accident, or born with a disability, parents naturally pour more of their time and energy into caring for that child.

My wife, Juhee grew up in that kind of home. Her older brother was in a car accident as a child, and he lived with cerebral palsy. Her parents carried a heavy load caring for him. Juhee understood that, even as a little girl. And because she loved her parents, she tried to be the "good child" who made life easier for them. While her siblings could say, "I don't like beans" and leave them, she would eat them with a smile, saying they were delicious. She helped take care of her aging grandmother. She helped with her disabled brother. She tried to do whatever she could to be helpful at home and carry more than her share, so her parents would have a little less to carry.

When we see children like that, we often say, "What a good child. How admirable." And it's true. But children who grow up hearing those kinds of messages often internalize an unspoken voice: "When I am helpful, when I make others happy, then I am loved." Over time, they become adults who are deeply sensitive to the needs of others. They grow into people who are kind, generous, and always ready to serve. Perhaps you know someone like that. Perhaps you even see yourself in that description.

Up to this point, people like this may look as if they have no problems at all—almost perfect. But as I've said many times, there is no such thing as a perfect person. All of us need to be freed from the false voices that shape our lives.

Children who grow up in families where they're always the helper—taking care of others, making sure everyone else is happy—often learn this without even realizing it: "Other people's needs come first, mine don't matter." And before long, they start to believe that even admitting their own desires is somehow selfish.

Let me paint a picture. Suppose your favorite treat is chocolate chip cookies. There are five cookies on the plate, but six people in the room. What would you do? Grab one quickly before they're gone? Or hold back, because if you eat one, someone else will go without? Which choice feels more like you? Maybe take all of them?

We can laugh at this, but for some people—even in imagination—it feels impossible to take what they truly want. A close friend of mine shared about a spiritual formation class where the teacher asked the group to close their eyes and picture their favorite fruit, sitting with their siblings. When it came time to take a piece, she couldn't bring herself to do it. Then the teacher changed the scenario: *"Now imagine there's one extra piece—everyone has had one, and there's*

still one left. If you want more, you may take it." But even then, she still couldn't reach out her hand. When she realized this, he wept.

Why? Because to her, simply acknowledging her own desire felt selfish. And deep down, there was an even greater fear: *"If I am selfish, if I fail to meet the needs of others, then I won't be loved."* The voice inside kept whispering: *"Love is not freely given. You have to earn it. You must prove yourself worthy in order to be loved."*

That false voice follows us into adulthood. There are people who keep going even when they're completely worn out, still trying to meet everyone else's needs. There are those who feel crushing guilt if they ever say no. And when the burden becomes too heavy, they find themselves thinking, *"I've given so much, I've sacrificed so much, and no one even notices."*

Martha

There's someone like this in the Bible. Who is it? It's Martha. Martha was Mary's sister, and also the sister of Lazarus—the one Jesus raised from the dead. Scripture doesn't tell us whether Martha or Lazarus was older. But Luke's Gospel says, *"A woman named Martha welcomed Jesus into her home."* Since Martha is described as the one who received Jesus, the head of the household, it's likely she was the eldest.

Church tradition even says that Martha, Mary, and Lazarus lost their parents when they were young, and had to rely on one another. If that's true, Martha stepped into the role of caretaker. She looked after her siblings, tended to their needs, and managed the household. She was the older sister who gave herself for the family before thinking about herself. Even her name, *Martha,* means "lady" or "mistress of the house."

It was in that home that Jesus came to teach. Mary sat at his feet, listening to every word. But Martha was busy—running around, preparing the food, checking to make sure the wine hadn't run out, making sure the guests had what they needed. She was pulled in every direction. And when she looked over, there was Mary—just sitting, quietly listening.

From Martha's point of view, how must that have felt? Annoying. Maybe even unfair. So Martha turned to Jesus and said, *"Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"* And Jesus answered her: *"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things. But only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her."*

This story is often preached as a contrast: Martha was distracted, Mary made the better choice. And the lesson is, be like Mary. Choose the spiritual over the practical. But I want us to hear this story differently. Do you think Martha didn't know that sitting at Jesus' feet was the better choice? Of course she knew. She longed for that too. But she felt she couldn't. As the one responsible for the household, she thought sitting down while others needed to be served would be irresponsible, even selfish.

And maybe, underneath, she was afraid: *"If I'm not the one others depend on… if I'm not the one who keeps giving… will I still be loved?"* Martha wanted to be with Jesus, but fear and duty pulled her in another direction. And it left her weary and frustrated. So Martha's complaint—*"Tell Mary to help me"*—was really the cry of a wounded child's heart: *"Lord, I want to be loved too."*

And I don't hear Jesus' words as a harsh rebuke. I hear them as an invitation. *"Martha, you too are free to choose the better part."* It's as if he was saying, *"Even if you don't bring me food, even if you don't refill my cup—I still love you. Come, sit with me. Take the portion you desire. It is yours too."*

Think about it. After hearing those words, do you think Martha went back to grumbling and kept choosing the lesser part? I don't believe that. I imagine she set her burden down, sat near Jesus, and listened with joy. For someone who had spent her whole life trying to be needed, trying to earn love by serving, Jesus gave a new assurance: *"Martha, you are loved unconditionally."* And that love changed her.

Loved Without Condition, Loving Without Condition

For us as Christians, love is not a prize we earn. It is not a wage we work for. God loves us—unconditionally. As 1 John tells us, *"In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins"* (1 John 4:10, NRSV). We did not love first. God loved us first.

So be free from the burden of trying to earn love. Even if you do not keep all of God's commandments… Even if you cannot meet every person's needs… Even if you take that extra cookie you really wanted— God still loves you. And when we truly receive that unconditional love of God, then we can begin to love without condition.

There was a physician in Korea named Dr. Chang Kee-Ryo. Most of you may not know his name, but in Korea, he was remembered as "the Schweitzer of Korea," "Little Jesus," and "the foolish doctor." Why? Because if patients had no money or said they had no money, he simply treated them anyway. For his entire life, he gave himself away like that. Once he said to a younger doctor, *"If people call you a fool, that means you've succeeded. Do you know how hard it is to live as a fool?"* He could live that way because he had experienced the great love of God— a love that set him free to love without conditions.

When we love like that, we stop complaining about what we don't get back. We learn to be honest about our limits. We can say, "I cannot do that," without fear of losing love. And without that fear, we can accept our own limits. We can even learn to love ourselves.

So place your hand on your heart, and repeat after me: *"I am God's beloved. I am loved as I am. Love is not something to earn— it is something to share."* And the next time fear creeps in— when you feel that if you are not useful enough you might not be loved— say these words again. May you receive God's unconditional love. May you live in that love, and freely pass it on. And as you do, may you come to know God more deeply. Amen.