

The String and the Beads

A Journey Toward Relating to God As Love and Through Love

By Dennis Rivers -- A talk for the Word and Life study group – October 15, 2026

The Bracelet We are Making

I want to begin today with an ordinary object that I think can help us see something extraordinary. Picture a bracelet — a string of beads. It has two parts that do very different jobs. The beads hold the color, the texture, the beauty of each individual piece. But it is the string that holds them all together. Without the string, you just have a handful of pretty beads rolling around in a drawer. With the string, you have a bracelet — a whole that is more than the sum of its parts.



I am going to use this simple image today as a way of understanding our spiritual lives, because I believe we think at two levels, and we need both.

The first level is the level of the beads. These are our individual ideas and concepts — the specific things we can name and point to. House. Barn. Forgiveness. Punishment. Specific events in history. Specific stages of life — childhood, old age. We rarely use these specific ideas to connect other ideas together. They sit in our minds like beads in a drawer, each one distinct and self-contained.

The second level is the level of the string. These are the big connecting ideas — the ones that have such a strong character, such a sweeping reach, that we use them to tie

together many other ideas into a meaningful whole. "The journey" is one of those string ideas. You can arrange all the events of a human life into a sequence and present them as a journey. "The quest" is another. These ideas do not sit quietly alongside the others. They organize the others. They give the other ideas their sequence and their meaning as part of a larger story.

I am convinced that we think at both levels all the time, and that the two levels support one another. The beads hold the color and the details of each step. The string holds the story, the sequence, and the meaning of the whole.

Religious life works the same way. We have our beads — hundreds of verses, our specific ideas, doctrines, stories, and practices. And we have our strings — the different sweeping storylines that make sense out of all those ideas and doctrines, indicate which are most central, and show how they all fit together.

Let me give you two examples. Original sin and the quest to be cleansed and saved from punishment — an idea associated primarily with Saint Augustine — is one such overarching storyline. It is one kind of string. When you thread the beads of faith onto that particular string, you get a particular bracelet: a story about fallenness, about guilt, about the need for rescue.

Original blessing — the idea that we are made in the image and likeness of God and that our deepest nature is good — is a different string, beginning in Genesis, articulated by Irenaeus of Lyon in the second century, and most recently embraced and explained as a universal spirituality by the theologian Matthew Fox. Thread the same beads of faith onto that string, and you get a very different bracelet: a story about giftedness, about gratitude, about growing into who we already are.

Notice something important here. The beads may be very similar. But a different string produces a different bracelet — a different way of seeing the whole of your spiritual life.

And here is what I find fascinating. We do not always choose our string consciously. Our brains are constantly assembling what you might call thought-bracelets — wholes made out of parts, plotlines made out of events. And this process is shaped by things we may not be fully aware of: our habits of thinking, the words available in our language, the stories available in our culture, and even where we are in the journey of our own development. A five-year-old and a fifty-year-old will often string the same beads in very different ways.

Today I want to explore one particular string — an idea that has drawn people toward it century after century, an idea so luminous that once you see it as a string rather than as one more bead, even a beautiful one, everything else looks different.

A Vision that Makes its Way through the Centuries

I have been reading a book called *Everything Belongs* by Father Richard Rohr, the Franciscan writer and teacher. In that book, Rohr draws on the work of the great Spanish mystic Saint John of the Cross, and the idea I want to explore today is one from John of the Cross that I would summarize this way: God desires to be known by us as love, more than through any other quality of the divine presence.

Please sit with that for a moment. Not that God has love, the way a person might have a good quality among other qualities. Not that God sometimes shows love, the way a parent might sometimes be affectionate. But that love is the deepest truth about God, and that God yearns for us to know this — to know God through love and as love, before all other ways of knowing.

The German theologian Paul Tillich once pointed out that our language and our ordinary thinking tempt us to speak of God as a separate object in a world of separate objects — something "out there" that can be known at arm's length, the way we might know a fact or a theory. Tillich urged us to move beyond that, drawing on the Apostle Paul's words: "In Him we live and move and have our being." God is not one more object in the room. God is the ground beneath every room.

In the language of our bracelet, the idea that God is love is not just another bead — not just another worthy idea to add to our collection of worthy theological ideas. Again and again, over the centuries, it has been a string. It has been one of those rare ideas that is capable of tying all the other ideas in the history of faith together into a meaningful whole. A different string. A different bracelet. A different way of seeing everything.

But is this just the personal opinion of a few mystics? Or does this idea have roots that go all the way down?

The Root – How Far Back Does this Idea Go?

It has roots that go all the way down. The deepest root is in the First Letter of John, Chapter 4, Verse 8. And the words are as simple as words can be: "God is love."

Those three words are worth pausing over, because they say something different from what we might expect. As I noted above in relation to a passage from John of the

Cross, the passage in John's First Letter does not say God *has* love, the way a person might have a generous streak. It does not say God *shows* love, the way a parent might show affection on a good day. It says God *is* love. That is to say, love is not simply one among many of God's radiant qualities, sitting alongside power, justice, and wisdom. Love is the ground from which all the other qualities arise.

And then the passage goes further. It says: "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." That is a breathtaking claim. It means there is a way of knowing that reaches God, and a way that doesn't. You can study theology your whole life, you can memorize scripture, you can argue doctrine with the best of them — but if you have not loved, you have not yet arrived at the knowing that counts. The way of knowing that reaches God is love itself.

The Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13:2, affirms that love is the deepest measure of discipleship. He is talking about people and how to evaluate them. John goes there and then, in my view, goes even deeper. John is talking about the nature of God-ness. I am convinced that this is the headwater of the Christian mystical tradition. Everything that follows in that tradition flows from this spring.

If the New Testament planted this seed, it did not die there. Across the centuries, voice after voice has returned to the same recognition — and each one saw a little further into it.

Voices Across the Centuries

Let us turn our attention now to three people who heard that seed and tended it — three voices separated by centuries, but united by the same luminous recognition. Three of the many who have followed and transmitted this light.

The first is Julian of Norwich, an English mystic of the fourteenth century. Julian received sixteen visions of the divine, and then spent twenty years in prayer and reflection, trying to understand what she had been shown. At the very end of her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*, she wrote that she had asked God in prayer what the meaning of it all was. And the answer she received was this: "Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love."

Listen to that threefold repetition. Julian is saying that love is not just one theme among many in what God is doing. It is the form, the content, and the motive of everything God reveals — all at once. And she says she was shown that God *wanted* her

to know this. The entire sequence of her visions was aimed at this single recognition. God has a preference for how we know God, and the preference is love.

The second voice is Catherine of Siena, a fourteenth-century Italian woman of extraordinary courage. In her great work, *The Dialogue*, Catherine presents God speaking directly in the first person. And what God keeps saying, over and over, is that love is the reason for everything — creation, incarnation, redemption, the gift of free will. God tells Catherine, in effect: "I made you because I wanted to love you, and I wanted you to be capable of receiving that love." The boldness of Catherine's text is that it puts the preference right in God's mouth. Not a theologian's argument about God, but God's own statement of purpose: I made you for love.

The third voice is Thomas Merton, the twentieth-century American monk and writer. Merton argued that the purpose of contemplative prayer is not to acquire information about God but to be drawn into God's love. And he said something that goes straight to the heart of our bracelet metaphor. He said the preference we are talking about is not arbitrary — it is not that God *chose* love over some other way of being known when other options were equally available. Rather, love is what God *is*. So when God asks to be known as love, God is simply asking to be known truthfully. Love is not a softer or simpler way of knowing God. It is the truest way. The way that distorts least. The way that brings you closest to what is actually there.

These three are not alone. Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century wrote that "love itself is knowledge" — that when we love God, we are not merely feeling something about God; we are knowing God in the most direct way available to a human being. Meister Eckhart, the great medieval mystic, spoke of God communicating Godself through an intimate self-giving that can only be described as love. The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote a book whose title is its entire argument: *Love Alone Is Credible*. Saint John of the Cross himself taught that in the deepest prayer, all the intellectual ways of knowing God are eventually stripped away, and what remains — what is revealed as having been there all along — is pure love.

These voices span eight centuries, but they all circle the same recognition. And then, on our journey of understanding, what we know of the life of Jesus takes it much deeper — from how we know God, to how we know God in and through how we treat each other.

What Jesus Added and Continues to Add

Everyone who studies the history of the Christian faith understands it from their own particular point of view. I accept that, and it applies to me as well. So what I offer you here is not the final truth about Jesus, but the path of one particular heart and mind.

I also want to pause here and affirm that there have been similar evolutions toward lovingkindness in many of the religions of Planet Earth. I can say “many” because I have studied many of them. I can’t use the word “all” simply because I have not studied all of them. For certain, the Bodhisattva path in Buddhism, and the vision of “All My Relations” in Native American spirituality, seem to me to point in exactly the same direction as “Love one another as I have loved you.”

In this talk, I am staying with examples from the Christian tradition for two reasons. First, to honor the long history of Word and Life, and how it began as a Catholic Bible Study group. And second, because I want to draw on materials and examples that are culturally available to you my listeners. I am not talking here about the spirituality of far-away peoples.

Turning now to the person who is probably the best-known teacher of lovingkindness in our culture, I want to say that in my view, Jesus was not simply a teacher of kindness. Jesus was a teacher and an incarnation — a making-real — of a **religion of kindness**, a vision of spirituality in which lovingkindness was the central and transcendent theme.

A word about that word, “lovingkindness.” The New Testament was written in Greek, and Greek has several words for love. The one that matters most here is *agape* — selfless love, love that gives without counting the cost. In English, the simple word “love” can mean many things: positive emotional connection, erotic attraction, fondness for a favorite food. Lovingkindness is probably a better translation of *agape* than the simple word “love,” because it carries the sense of a love that reaches out, that acts, that cares for the other person’s wellbeing as naturally as breathing. Since I am describing my own path, I will stay with lovingkindness.

All the examples I have shared so far — Julian, Catherine, Merton, and the great cloud of witnesses behind them — at first glance seem to have about them a distinctly vertical emphasis. Their work first focuses on the love relationship between the soul and God. Jesus recognizes this tradition in the commandment “Love the Lord your God with all your heart.”

But then Jesus does something extraordinary, and our mystical exemplars follow in His footsteps. He takes the love that flows between the soul and God and asks his disciples to bring it into every human relationship. "Love one another as I have loved you." That "as I have loved you" changes everything. It is no longer an abstract principle. It is personal. It is a flame passing from heart to heart.

The commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself" was already present in the Jewish tradition, and it is a beautiful teaching. But I have come to hear it as the far-away version — addressed to everybody but to nobody in particular. The "Love one another as I have loved you" of Jesus is the up-close version. Very personal. Very specific. Love as something you have received from a real person and are now being asked to pass along to the next real person.

And then Jesus goes even further. He says: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." The needy, the wounded, the desperate — they are no longer far-away figures, objects of charity at a comfortable distance. They are right-here figures. They are, Jesus says, *Him*. When you feed a hungry person, you are feeding Christ. When you visit someone in prison, you are visiting Christ. The love that flows between the soul and God is the same love that flows between one human being and another. The vertical and the horizontal are one.

If "God is love, and whoever dwells in love dwells in God and God in them," then ***every moment of lovingkindness is an incarnational moment***. Every time one person reaches out to another with genuine care, the highest values in human life enter into and lift up the most ordinary encounters. This can be the string that holds the beads together in a deeply new way — not just as a beautiful theory, but as a lived reality, happening whenever love passes from one person to another.

The idea that God is love challenges us to contemplate a truth that seems to live outside of our ordinary experience of time. And, the commandment of Jesus to "love one another as I have loved you" then invites us to bring that timeless truth into ordinary time — into the days and moments of our human lives.

That, it seems to me, is one possible deeper meaning of the word "Incarnation". The traditional Christian vision of the Incarnation is that it was a once-in-all-time event that happened in the life of only one person, Jesus of Nazareth. But the "God is love and whoever dwells in love dwells in God and God in them" teaching suggests, straight on the face of it, that the process of incarnating lovingkindness is a continuing process — entering into human moments, not needing to stop, not needing to be completed. Love does not need to rest. It is in the nature of love to reach out forever.

The Underground River

Although the practice of incarnational lovingkindness got left out of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, the inspiration to incarnate lovingkindness has flowed through the history of Christianity like an underground river — too often hidden, but there, waiting to be rediscovered.

You can see it breaking through the surface in the lives of the very saints we have been talking about. Catherine of Siena did not only write about God's love in beautiful words. When the plague swept through her city, Catherine went out and nursed the dying — washing their bodies, holding their hands, burying the dead when others had fled. Her theology of love was not a theory. It was a practice she carried into the most terrifying circumstances of her time. The God who said "I made you because I wanted to love you" was being incarnated in every basin of water, every comforting touch.

Thomas Merton did not only write about contemplative prayer in the quiet of his monastery. In the 1960s, as the war in Vietnam escalated, Merton worked diligently from his monastery room to oppose it — writing letters, publishing essays, engaging in correspondence with peace activists and political leaders, insisting that a contemplative life rooted in God's love could not remain silent while people were being destroyed. For Merton, the love you meet in prayer and the love you practice in the world are not two different things. They are the same love, flowing in two directions.

And in our own time, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. may be the most powerful example of all. King did not simply preach about love in the abstract. He built his entire movement on what he called the Beloved Community — a vision of a society transformed not by hatred or revenge but by the persistent, courageous practice of lovingkindness, even toward those who opposed him. King drew deeply on the teachings of Jesus, and what he drew out was precisely the theme we have been exploring today: that love is not just a feeling or a private spiritual experience. It is a force — the most powerful force in human life — and it is meant to be incarnated in how we treat one another, in how we build our communities, in how we confront injustice.

King's vision of the Beloved Community is incarnational spirituality at its boldest. It says that the love of God is not something we admire from a distance. It is something we are called to build with our hands, in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, in our families, in the streets — wherever human beings need to be treated as the sacred beings they are.

Catherine with the plague victims. Merton with his letters against the war. King with his marchers on the bridge. The underground river keeps breaking through. And every time it breaks through, it looks the same: someone has taken the timeless truth that God is love and brought it into ordinary time, into the messy, difficult, beautiful particulars of a human life.

The String That Holds the Beads of My Life Together

I want to close with something personal. The quote from John of the Cross — that before all other ways, God yearns to be known by us as love — points me toward a deeply different string for the bracelet of my own faith. I grew up listening to radio preachers preach hellfire and damnation. In the city where I grew up there was a Christian seminary that required each applicant to affirm their convinced belief in the “Lake of Fire” where the souls of unbelievers would be “tormented day and night forever”. (Revelation 20:10) As a young adult I was deeply troubled by this, because I could not understand how a God who is love could also be the operator of an eternal torture chamber. After serving in the Vietnam war, in which the United States burned many thousands of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians to death with napalm, a jellied gasoline, I began to find the idea that God would burn people so painfully distressing that I nearly had a nervous breakdown.

I never actually resolved this issue, but inspired by the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I have mostly let go of it. I realized that my assignment from the Universe was not to define what a spiritual life should mean to everybody everywhere forever, but rather, what a spiritual life actually means to me, right here, right now. That sent me on a quest for a guiding idea that would be even stronger and more compelling than the image of an eternal torture chamber.

A different guiding idea now holds the beads of my life together for me, with a different sequence and a different overall message. The message is this: We were born to give birth to this lovingkindness, to live it in new ways, to carry it forward, to mend the world with it. Jesus calls us to this life. So to the saints and prophets of many faiths. So does human evolution.

Like a giant redwood tree, the idea that God is love and wants to be known as love and through love, is so large an idea that, as far as I can see, we can embrace it, we can hug the tree, but we can never really get our mental arms all the way around it. It will always be larger than us.

No matter how many times we fail to live this lovingkindness — and there is painful evidence of failure all around us: wars, genocides, the public celebration of cruelty —

no matter how many times we may fail, lovingkindness keeps on calling to us from a realm beyond time that we do not understand. Yet we can open to that lovingkindness. We can live it. And we can know it more fully as we become it more fully.

I see the moment-to-moment experience of lovingkindness, right here, right now, as the heart of our deepest heart — the outpouring of that Infinite Heart in whom “we live and move and have our being”.

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Discussion questions for Word and life gathering:

1. When you think of your own spiritual life, what guiding theme makes it more understandable to you.
2. The world around us is full of violent conflict and cruelty. In the face of this, what helps you keep alive your faith in love?
3. The talk names St. Catherine with plague victims, Merton opposing the war, and Rev. Dr. King on the bridge, as moments when the underground river of lovingkindness broke through. Who is someone — famous or not — in whom you have seen that river break through? What did it look like?