

“Love in Action”

Clark A. Pomerleau for Spokane Friends, July 19, 2026

One thing I love about you all is that you better the world I live in. I think you are love in action, using your passion and talents to help your families, to bring joy to others, to give generously, to put your bodies where your ethics are—all the ways you bring your values to bear on our world. My message today about love as a verb influencing the world combines my experience with models that have molded or do inspire me.

When I was a kid, I enjoyed Presbyterian Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. God provided my family with comfort, community, and an ethics of care. When my Granny was a toddler, her father went to Heaven, but she got comfort from creating a relationship with him through prayer. My Mom found community by joining a church from which she enacted her values at Barton School and Meals on Wheels. My Dad felt ethically shaped by his Jesuit education; he substituted the Good for a personal relationship with a God as he taught ethics and did service. (If you’re like my Dad, you might substitute in the Good throughout my message.)

My family’s relationship with religion did not include sin and damnation. So, I was shocked when my 6th grade Sunday School teachers said we all needed to become missionaries because anyone who died without taking Jesus as their personal savior went to Hell. I understood as a child that continents were large enough to contain people who might never meet a Christian. Would they go to Hell if nobody reached them? Yes. End of discussion. This seemed too unfair. I assumed as a child that adult volunteers accurately portrayed God. But I could not side with a God who would eternally punish people for not knowing or worshipping God. And so, I put away that God and such followers (1 Corinthians 13:11). Over the years, such believers used their God to inflict harm on my liberal and queer students, so I wasn’t inclined to return to church.

But I’m inspired to return to the idea of “God is love” based on what kind of love God exemplifies, what kind of God is love, and why centering love means embracing bettering this world instead of worrying about people’s afterlife. Today I consider the queries,

1. “What kind of love and God does “God is Love” describe?”
2. “How can biblical letters to ‘love one another’ because ‘God is Love’ and to show your faith through works enhance our lives and this world?”

1 John 4:7-8 reads (in the NRSV in these pews):

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

What kind of love are we to have toward one another? Leann Williams returned me to the book, *Prayers of the Cosmos*, which explores how the Aramaic meanings of words used in Jesus's time deepen our understanding of New Testament books. The Greek word for love, *agapē*, fits later Christian focus on love as a sacrificial choice. But the Aramaic *Hubba* comes from a root meaning "to embrace" or "to set on fire." It implies a deeply felt, passionate, and relational kind of affection, not solely a sacrifice or moral duty. So, if we are to love one another in this sense, 1 John directs us to affectionate, intense dedication in our relationships with one another.

Then, who are the "one another"? Personally, I apply this passage today as broadly as possible as all living beings. At least all people seems to accord with Jesus revealing his identity first to a Samaritan women, with the Gospels, and with Paul's message. But I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that 1 John itself was originally written as a divisive polemic against some Christians. The book portrays an author who led a local congregation that had just split over their understanding of who Jesus was. The author considered those who agreed with him "brothers and sisters." He called those who left "liars" (1 John 1:6-10; 2:4;4:20) and "antichrists" (1 John 2:18-19) because they did not agree with his insistence that God sent Jesus as a sacrifice to atone for people's sins and reconcile believers to God. That local "other side" held a different early Christian view—that Jesus' ascension showed the spirit need not be imprisoned forever in the material world. Their view of salvation was a type of enlightenment.¹

When I studied and taught the first 300 years of Christianity and the 1500s-1600s, I loved the passionate debates about who God was and what people's relationship to God and other people should be. But the violence of those times was intense. One of the things that most appeals to me about the Society of Friends and about Unitarian Universalists is that both can foster comfort, community, and caring without requiring individuals to conform to a shared doctrine.

The question, what kind of God "God is Love" describes, ties directly to early Quakers and Christian universalists past and present. Over 130 before me, George Fox and his followers turned from their time's religious authorities: the Anglican priests, the Calvinists who believed that God predestines only a few undeserving elect to go to Heaven. The writings of George Fox, Margaret Fell, and other first-generation Friends describe the life-changing excitement Quakers felt to realize that the Spirit of God is already in each person's heart waiting for a person to respond to it. In George Fox's universalism, anyone with an open heart before or after Jesus walked the earth can inwardly know the truth about God (rather than being dependent on preaching from paid priests or missionaries.)² Humans – made in God's

¹ Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?: The Making of the Christian Myth*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 215-218.

² Thanks to LaVerne Biel, who recommended D. Elton Trueblood, *The People Called Quakers* (New York: Harper and Row, 2002 [1966]), 66-67.

image with a divine seed within – can actively respond to that divine light within them rather than being “totally depraved” and deserving of Hell, but a few chosen for heaven by God anyway. For Fox and his comrades, when people respond to that divine light within, their lives are completely changed. I hear the Aramaic of intense, passionate, relational love for everyone in the writings of first-generation Quakers, who believed one’s embracing of the Light would transform their actions.³

Early Quakers would likely see their God’s character in twenty-first-century Christian theology professor Thomas Jay Oord’s description. “God is Love” in 1 John is Oord’s starting point. He coined the term “amipotence” to explain why an all-powerful and all-knowing God would not prevent evil. From the Latin a-m-i for love, “amipotence” makes love what constrains how God wields power. Of course, we are limited to our human framework to try to understand by analogy anything greater than we are. So, we apply human ideals of relational love to our concept of God. Real love is necessarily uncontrolling.⁴ God’s love for all creation makes God ethically choose not to control what people do.

Oord echoes early Quaker universalism as an equal option for all to respond to the call of God within, and he goes further. A loving God neither coerces people here and now nor inflicts eternal torment by consigning people to a punitive hell. Oord interprets “eternal life” to include quality of life now. People still suffer and cause suffering as self-imposed consequences of choosing to live without loving-kindness. But God or the Good is always there to choose.⁵ U.U. Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed put it another way: Universal salvation is the consequence of Universal love: the recognition that love is the grounding, the basis of all.⁶

So, to ask a question that reflects Friends of the 1600s, how does that love appear in action? My thoughts on my second epistle choice won’t take as long. James 2:14-17 reads:

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food ¹⁶and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet

³ Trueblood, 72, 76. The early Quakers’ universalism replies to my Sunday School teachers that people had access to knowing God who lived before Jesus was on earth or now live in places where people are not telling them about Christianity.

⁴ Sofia Betancourt and Adam Robersmith, “NYSCU Bicentennial Keynote: ‘200 Years of Love at the Center,’” *UUWorld* Spring/Summer 2026 Issue, “Meeting the Moment” <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/nyscu-bicentennial-keynote-sermon>. Thomas Jay Oord, “What is Amipotence?” January 7th, 2025, <https://thomasjayoord.com/index.php/blog/archives/what-is-amipotence> and “Amipotence,” February 24, 2023, <https://thomasjayoord.com/index.php/blog/archives/amipotence>.

⁵ Thomas Jay Oord, “Predestination, Hell, and Eternal Life,” July 30, 2010, https://thomasjayoord.com/index.php/blog/archives/predestination_hell_and_eternal_life.

⁶ Mark Morrison-Reed, “Dragged Kicking and Screaming into Heaven,” October 12, 2008, <https://www.unityunitarian.org/uploads/6/1/0/3/6103699/12oct2008.pdf>.

you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Protestants often avoid this passage, which reads as Catholic doctrine that people are saved by both faith and goods works. I'll be honest – I have always felt more comfortable with works than faith, partly because works benefit others. George Fox and his earliest followers (Nicholas Bond and Edward Burrough) were typical of non-Catholics of their time in being anti-Catholic. But they embraced James 2. Fox wrote that as one responds to the Light of God inside, they “must show forth that their lives and conversation [conduct], and tongues, are changed.”⁷

Individual actions have positive or negative consequences that affect others, which is why seeing eternal life as starting during this life and ending with everyone's happiness calls for individual and collective work for good. Rev. Dr. Sofía Betancourt drew out this universalist significance. She said, “To say that salvation is collective is to insist that there can be no single ultimate good, no living up to the great potential of human living, without an embodied commitment to that same good being not only theoretically, but concretely achieved by the community as a whole. Why do we need to be saved in the first place? Because the realities of greed, overwork, and systems of oppression and marginalization mean that we need something to call us back to the ideals of human goodness that we preach and teach about. It is not enough to say that we are inherently good and simply wait....” A belief I share with Betancourt and George Fox is “that humanity carries within itself the inherent potential for human goodness.”⁸

My faith in human goodness exists next to the realities of human atrocities by acknowledging that many choose over and over to live without practicing loving-kindness, compassion, and understanding. But if we pay attention to our patterns, we can improve and live up to our potential. In the Aramaic sense, in the Quaker sense, in the U.U. sense, the ideal of Love that we are supposed to emulate is action rather than emotion. The inner light I think of reflects a vast, limitless force of loving-kindness that reveals that all of us are interconnected in well-being and refuses to create an “us” and “them.” As the heart awakens to others' needs, there is an inner call to act to alleviate suffering and foster happiness through kindness, understanding, and generosity.⁹

⁷ Michael Mullet, “A Catholic Looks at Quakerism,” *Quaker Studies* 2 (1997): 57-64, here 62 and 63. Mullet refers to George Fox, *A Journal or Historical Account of ... George Fox*, vol. 2 (Leeds: Anthony Pickard, 1901), 522 and Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*,... 8th ed. (Birmingham: John Baskerville, 1765), 169. Robert Barclay wrote: “the immediate Cause of Justification [is] this inward Work of regeneration....”

⁸ Sofía Betancourt, Adam Robersmith, “NYSCU Bicentennial Keynote: ‘200 Years of Love at the Center,’” *UUWorld* Spring/Summer 2026 Issue, “Meeting the Moment,” <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/nyscu-bicentennial-keynote-sermon>.

⁹ God is love to emulate, here is very similar to loving-kindness and compassion. “Karaniya Metta Sutta: The Buddha's Words on Loving-kindness” (Sn 1.8). Dalai Lama, *The Compassionate Life*. Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*.

And, to conclude, I support both God and enacting love looking different for each of us. For those with a Christ-centered life, what Jesus is recorded to have done while living on earth gives people quite a role-model. For those within a mystical tradition of inner consciousness, maybe God-as-love and love as doing the good are the uniting forces that hold the cosmos together. I hope you will take from my message and open worship both how important you are and some time for you to discern:

1. “What kind of love and God “God is Love” describes” and
2. “How your love is enacted to enhance our lives and this world.”