

Love Wins

1 John 4:1; 5:4 (IBT)

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Pastor Sarah Wiles

Beloved,
let us love one another
because love is of God;
everyone who loves is born of God
and has knowledge of God.

And everyone born of God
conquers the world,
and the power that has conquered the world
is our faith.

...

God is love. Everyone who loves is born of God. And everyone born of God conquers the world.

Love is born of God. Love conquers the world. Or, as folks put it these days, "Love wins." Love wins.

Which I so desperately want to be true. But is it? And what does it even mean?

This isn't the only place in scripture that this promise appears. If you're looking for it, you can find it all over the place. This was a consistent belief in the prophetic tradition and for the early followers of Jesus, that the love they met in Jesus could, would, and in some way already had conquered the world.

It comes up beautifully in 1 Corinthians 13, which we often read for weddings, but is really intended to address love in a community or congregation: "Love bears all things, trusts all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails."

Love never fails. Whatever is born of God conquers the world. Love wins.

I so desperately want to believe that. But it is hard. We live in a world where there are more than 65 million refugees,¹ where more than 2.5 billion people lack access to basic sanitation,² where war grinds on and on and on, where more than 2 million people are incarcerated here in the land of the free,³ and children go to bed hungry every night. We could go on.

In the face of all of that, what does it mean to say that love wins, love never fails, love conquers the world? Are we just fooling ourselves?

¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-migrants-world-day-un-a7090986.html>

² <https://water.org/our-impact/water-crisis/>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incarceration_in_the_United_States

One of my favorite authors, Debbie Blue, has helped me with understanding what conquering the world might look like. She makes the point that it's not the same as how an army conquers, or a superhero vanquishes the bad guys. When love wins, it's different.

She points out, "Jesus doesn't make many power plays. And yet we seem to persistently try to somehow skew the story in the direction of power. We seem to desperately want to believe in a powerful god. We want astonishing displays of power. I do. But as far as I know, as far as I can tell so far, God doesn't act this way..."

"If you look at Jesus with the idea that looking at him will tell you what God is like, [then we see that] ... God's thing is not anything like what we know of as power; or the kind of power we crave, or believe in, or follow or try to have. It's the power in the blood of the lamb—the little lamby, the puny baby sheep. What kind of ... power [is that]? Seems like it's a whole different sort of thing... Maybe we made up the Almighty, the all-powerful, because it's what we think we want, but it's not really what we need.

"What we need is love. All the posturing, the power-grabbing, the diminishing other people to make ourselves great—maybe it's because we want to be loved... need to be loved. We could spend our lives involved in some destructive life-sucking game to try to prove otherwise, or maybe we could relax into what might save us from our violence-spawning fears and hate-making anxiety."⁴

How do we get out of the cycle of violence, and tit-for-tat retribution, and the anxiety that makes us defend ourselves and lash out? How do we face the suffering in our lives, and find strength to stand in solidarity with others in their suffering? What if it's through a power that looks like weakness, and yet bears all things, trusts all things, hopes for all things, endures all things, a love that never fails?

A lot of times love winning feels a lot like losing, at least on the face of it. It's scary, and it doesn't really seem like it's going to guarantee anything.

Love is often telling the truth about ourselves and what we've done, even when we've really screwed up and we're scared and feel like we might die of shame: to tell the truth, even then, and face what happens next, that's love. No matter what happens next, when you've told a deep truth, you're free. Love has won.

Love is often losing an argument, letting go of the rope in the never-ending game of tug-of-war, releasing the old grudge that kept you warm at night even as it held you captive. It's choosing the person over the position. Relationship over some idea of purity. That's love winning.

Love is sometimes, maybe even often, an ending. It may be letting go of the way things once were, or giving up power, or surrendering to reality. That's how love wins.

Love is never condoning abuse or justifying violence or harm. It is never sitting passively by as someone is hurt. Sometimes love is a strong boundary, accountability. But it is not vengeful. It does not answer evil with evil.

Love seeks the common good, the table big enough for everyone. That's what it looks like when love wins.

⁴ Debbie Blue, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible*. 184-187.

No one's love, this side of the grave, is complete or perfect. We do our best to love within our setting, with our gifts and fears and weaknesses. We fall short, and that's an opportunity to lean on love again. Thankfully, the ultimate triumph of love is not up to us. Our task is just to participate in it. Lean into it. Trust it.

The song we're going to sing in a minute, "We Shall Overcome," is one of those that is so embedded that no one can trace it to a true source. It may have sprung from the soil of another song, "I'll Overcome Some Day," which was written by a Black pastor just a few dozen years after slavery ended as he ministered to a congregation of people fleeing the South. It seems to have also popped up around the same time at labor strikes at mines. The tune has been formed and reformed. It echoes "No More Auction Block," and "The Sicilian Mariners Hymn," and another 19th century hymn, "I'll Be Alright." It has been sung around the world, in situations of deep hardship, by people with every reason to despair. We could hear it as a "our team's going to beat their team" sort of theme, but I don't think that's quite right. Instead, it leans into the gospel promise that God will not rest until all are gathered in, until Christ—which is to say love—is all in all, until love wins.

As we sing, if you'd like to hold hands with people around you, I invite you to do so. This is a song that beckons connection. If that makes you uncomfortable, that's just fine. You might clasp your hands in front of you so that those around you know you'd rather not. Come friends, let's sing our faith.

- Sarah W. Wiles, 2024