

If I say the word “love,” you probably think of a deep emotion you share with a specific person. Love makes our days happy and helps us do other things with a joyful heart. We make time for that kind of love. We reorganize our whole day to enjoy it even for an hour. The cost of sacrifice is nothing compared to the reward of love.

However, to Jesus, love is hard. When he says, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” he implies you wouldn’t normally think of doing that. You may not get along with your next-door neighbors – you want leaves to fall on their lawn, not yours; a power failure to affect their house, not yours; the fence to favor your property line, not theirs. When you think of love as something emotionally life-giving, you wonder what on earth Jesus meant by loving your neighbor.

And then there’s the whole business of loving God. We do it, but we do not often feel love in the arms of God the way we feel it in the arms of a person. It’s a different kind of love – one that is surely better for us, but not what people think of when they think of love.

Today’s psalm only adds to this confusion over the word. We sang the very first line of Psalm 18 as our refrain today: “I love you, Lord, my strength.” Strength is certainly a good quality to possess, but I don’t know how many people would name it as the top draw in the person they love. People in a good marriage feel strong, but the psalm calls God “my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my rock of refuge, my shield, the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.” We love God, it says, because God has kept us safe from our enemies. This is a little like singing, “I love the Department of Homeland Security,” or “I love the makers of antivirus software,” or “I love seatbelt manufacturers.” Safety is not the image that comes to mind when we think of love.

So, perhaps we think of love in the wrong way. The youthful, robust romance of love does wear off, and if it isn’t supported by other virtues, love may die together with the romance. But it doesn’t have to. Love can thrive if we think of it less as an emotion and more as a way of life. It is very hard to love emotionally some of our neighbors, yet we believe that God loves everyone. If we want a better attitude toward our neighbor, it helps to seek what inside that person God does love. After all, there are people who can’t stand us, and yet God loves us, and usually we have a good idea why – you can see your own good qualities more than some other people can. Everybody has good qualities; they’re just not visible to everybody else. Loving other people does not mean agreeing with them, spending time with them, embracing their ideas, or feeling romantic with them. It means seeing them as God sees them, and loving them that way, with all their faults and strengths.

There are times you may not love God very much because of what has happened to you or to others in the world. But the very thing that causes this frustration, strength, is what Psalm 18 loves. If God truly has strength, God could make things very different, and when things don’t go differently, especially in our relationships with the people we love, we wonder what has happened to God’s strength. It is always there, and when we acknowledge it, rely on it, and love it, we can find hope in asking for its results and peace by accepting what it brings.