

# *Answering the Love of God: Living our Testimonies*

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**Joan Wena**

*Friends World Committee  
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## ***God is Love***

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### **What is Love?**

Love is the most used and perhaps the most abused, sometimes most cheapened and most misunderstood word.

As a child I knew my parents loved me. They cared for me, they provided for me all my needs and provided the security of a home and family.

What was my response? I loved them in my own childish way because to me they were the world. Sometimes, however, I took their love for granted and put a lot of selfish demands on them. I felt it was their duty to provide. As a teacher I often heard girls say, "I never asked to be born—therefore my parents must do this or that for me."

As a teenager, my view of love acquired a new and more exciting dimension. This new dimension was best expressed through those very popular songs by contemporary famous pop singers like Jim Reeves, Elvis Presley and the others. These were the authors of love and it was a mutual feeling of the peer group. Those of you who were then young—you understand what I mean.

In the mid-sixties at Kaimosi Girls High School (my headmistress is here), weekends were wonderful retreats from study to listen to pop music. When a Jim Reeves record played on the school radio in the news room, the volume was switched to full blast and girls appeared from all directions crowding to listen to the music. If Jim Reeves had walked into the School, Pearl Spoon, the Headmistress, would have lost all her girls! We would have happily

married him, had he shown any interest, but, thank God, he never came, so Pearl Spoon never lost her girls.

As headmistress at Lugulu Girls High School, I watched my girls go through it. Of course for them Jim Reeves and his contemporary pop singers were old-fashioned. For them, their authors on love were Michael Jackson, Madonna, Dolly Parton and others. They did their "thing" even better. Their outing, believe me, was always to a boys' school, Friends School-Kamusilinga for example. On a number of occasions we had quarrels and sometimes fights. Do you know what we fought about? I would have refused them an outing to a boys' school and insisted they invite a girls' school for the debate, drama or whatever function they had. When they lost the battle, they became very poor hostesses. But then I saw the other side of the coin. I saw them rejected, sometimes "heartbroken," so they thought and consequently went into depression. This hurt their studies. Then it was my turn to counsel them; at this point we did not fight, we were friends. "Love" had failed.

This type of love, reckless, crazy, unreasonable and sometimes unreal, never lasts. We all experienced it and at one time we have travelled on that avenue.

As parents we continued to love our children out of parental instinct or duty; sometimes it is difficult to say. Most of the time our love is appreciated and we enjoy the relationship. Sometimes, however, we feel harassed and manipulated by the same children we love, then we are tempted to resign as parents—only...we have no idea where we should go to resign. We remain parents forever.

In all circumstances this portrays human love which is characterised, in part, by powerful emotions, sometimes self-seeking ambitions, self-centred attitudes, desire to possess and dominate, restless and insatiable, manipulating both people and situations in order to achieve its end. That is Human Love.

What about God's Love? How is it different? In I John 3:16, we are told that God is Love. His essential nature is Love. He is not just lovable. He is not just lovely or loving.

He is Love itself. His Love is

- ▶ all embracing as it binds all human beings together, you and me.
- ▶ It is unmerited as it is given to all, however unworthy.
- ▶ It is sacrificial—this is shown by the death of his only son on the cross.
- ▶ It is merciful as it offers salvation to all sinners, you and me.
- ▶ It is inseparable as *nothing*, not even death, can break it.
- ▶ It is sincere and it remains unchanged under all circumstances.
- ▶ It is timeless and lasts forever.
- ▶ It is generous because it has an open heart and an open hand.
- ▶ It is forgiving because it is big enough to forgive and give a second chance because it believes the best in us.
- ▶ It is love that is spontaneous, unmotivated, unconditional. It knows no boundaries, no barriers and no restrictions.

In Ephesians 3:17-19 we are told that it is so wide, so high, so deep that we shall never see the end of it or fully understand. That is *Divine Love*. It is God's Love.

This divine Love is the greatest gift God has given to us. In I Corinthians 13:1-4 we are told this love is given to us freely. This love is the fabric that holds mankind and it was manifested through the death of his son on the cross. I John 3:16 reads, "This is how we know what love is, Jesus Christ laid down his life for us."

This Love, as priceless as it is, is given to us abundantly and freely whatever our state of being. We are not given because we are lovable or because we have earned it, but because it is his nature to do so.

He loves us to the outermost end, to the end of our sins, meanness, selfishness and arrogance. Moreover, this love has neither boundaries nor barriers. It pays no attention to the divisions made by nature. God, for example, has no preference for race, for nation, for family or sex. He just gives his love in plenty to all of us and like a waterfall it never stops to fall.

Probably you could think of an experience in your life where you have a friend who is showering you with gifts, every Christmas, every birthday, every occasion. They are always sending you gifts whether you send them one or not, they constantly send you gifts. That is the kind of Love we have from God.

Receiving God's Love, as we do, every day of our lives, how then do we respond to it?

One thing is clear, our response to his Love is on his terms, never on our own terms. It is not, for example, how we wish to and when we wish to respond, but rather how he wants us to do so.

In Mark 12:30-31, when Jesus was asked by one of the Pharisees which was the most important commandment, Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.... The second is....love your neighbour as yourself." There is no commandment greater than this! Love therefore holds the highest or supreme value in life. It is not only the highest value in Christianity but in entire human life. Man minus love is a devil.

Psychologists the world over hold a view that people have broken down because they have not been loved and have not learnt to love. Love God your Lord with all your heart and soul and love your neighbour as yourself. This leaves us

breathless, how can it be humanly possible? How do I love my neighbour as myself?

But it is possible if we attain that relationship with God where we wholly depend on the Holy Spirit. When this happens, God gives us sufficient grace and strength to love him with our whole self and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

If, on the other hand, we depend on our human strength and love we are bound to create divisions and preferences which will fall short of God's expectations.

**Love your neighbour as yourself.**

How does God want us to respond and when does he want us to respond? In I John 4:11-12 we are told, "Since God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No one has seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."

Verse 20 goes on to say, "If anyone says 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has never seen." God's love is a free gift to us and our love for him must be manifested through fellowship and service to mankind. For this to be possible, love must be the controlling force of our mind, our thoughts and our actions.

We are commissioned to love one another, to love our neighbours as ourselves, to love God's people whatever their state of being.

Our love for each other must be translated into *action*. In John 21:17 Jesus demands, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" the third time, then says, "*Feed my sheep*." Christ demands that our love for him must be spent out for others; it must be translated into action! "*Feed my sheep*," he says.

At the beginning of this year on New Year's Eve, 1996, in Kenya, a man and his family were expecting Christ to come. I would say he was a kind of fanatic. He believed the end of the world was coming and Christ was supposed to come

before the end of 1996. As it happened, Christ did not come and what did the man do? He was disappointed because his loved one had not come as he promised and indeed he committed suicide because Christ had not come. His love was terminal because it was selfish love that ignored the human and recognised God in isolation hence his utter disappointment when Christ did not come. This man committed suicide because, according to him, Christ did not come. This is true, the Kenyans will confirm. It was in the papers and it was everywhere. He committed suicide because he had sold everything and he had been waiting for Christ.

And yet Christ came in many different ways, which the fanatic failed to recognise.

God does not only want us to sing praises to him testifying how much we love him or professing about the marvellous revelations we have had. Our love for him must be manifested through love and service to man.

I had an experience at one time in Chwele Girls High School as a head teacher. My girls around midnight heard noises down at the hostel and I went to investigate what was happening. When I entered the dining room, Forms Three and Four were all there—the senior girls—and I think the Holy Spirit had descended because there was a lot of noise going on. The girls were speaking in tongues and raising hell! I opened the door and entered. I did not talk but I think one of them, hearing the door, kind of looked up and they saw me. All of a sudden word went round that I had come in and then the Holy Spirit left. They went quiet and I believe they were scared because they did not know what was going to happen. All I said to them was, “Girls, if you are possessed of holy spirit, is there one which knows when the headmistress is coming so that it can take off? Then I believe you don’t need that kind of holy spirit.”

God wants us, like Peter, to *feed his sheep*. Love without service is of no use to him because it is like a blind alley to a motorist: it leads to a dead end.

Like Peter, we are asked over and over again, “Do you love me?” and when we say yes we are told, “feed my sheep.”

Who are his sheep, how do we know them when we see them? We could be feeding the wrong ones, is it not logical that we hold on until we are sure? In this state we keep saying we shall feed the sheep, but the time is not ripe yet. “Feed my Sheep,” the Lord keeps commanding, and he does have an assortment of sheep!

- ▶ Some of them dirty with lice all over.
- ▶ Some that are sick and consumed with deadly diseases like cancer and AIDS.
- ▶ Some that are malnourished in refugee camps in Africa, Europe and Asia.
- ▶ Some that have gone astray in our midst.
- ▶ Some that are hard-core criminals in our prisons.

They are all *God's sheep* and they all need feeding. What a challenge! No wonder we sometimes try to avoid.

To be able to respond to God's love it is imperative that we understand its characteristics as outlined earlier. In I Corinthians 13:1-13, we are told that God's love is everything that is *pure and good*. In II Corinthians 12:15, Paul tells the Corinthians he will very gladly spend and be spent for them: that is *Divine Love*. If we have God's love in our hearts, we deliberately identify ourselves with God's interest in other people and, remember, God is interested in every kind of man there is, white, black, yellow, rich, poor, old, young, men or women.

This means Christian ministry and service starts right where we are, and all the time. Moreover we have no right whatsoever to be guided by our affinities like tribe, like race, like nation, religion or family. Christian love includes enemies as well. In Kenya during the clashes when people lost their lives, it is nice to know that people from different communities, the communities which were supposed to be burning each other's houses, were the same people who

would go and assist each other. Christian love includes enemies. For Christians, God's Love is the greatest and strongest weapon that will overcome evil and break the cruellest heart! God's Love will constantly seek, constantly restore, constantly protect mankind, it never gives up. Armed with this love, we are called to feed his sheep. Twelve hours a day, thirty days a month and twelve months a year!

In other words, where we are—whatever the time, whatever the circumstances—so long as there are other human beings, we are called to serve. The type of service will vary according to need and circumstances, but the opportunity is always there. It could simply be a smile, a hug. It could simply be being there to listen with respect.

It could be in our own communities, maybe our yearly meetings, where we could help make fair decisions which enhance respect for all concerned. It could be caring for the widows and elderly people. It could be teaching positive values to our youth. It could mean sharing our resources, however meagre they are, with those in need. It could mean breaking the culture of receiving and embarking on a new culture of giving.

It could be at our place of work where we can help fight all forms of social injustice. It could be missionary work out there in Bosnia, in Rwanda, in Burundi, in Ethiopia, or anywhere else in the world. In whatever capacity and at whatever level, we are feeding his sheep, we are responding to his love freely given to us.

Sometime in February 1995 in Nairobi at around ten in the morning, I had gone to the city market and all of a sudden there was a lot of commotion. Some four men, armed robbers, confronted a man in an exchange stall where they changed money, and attempted to grab the money. They did and as they took off, one of them was tripped by the crowd and he fell. The poor man, because there were so many people converging on him, he was stoned and left dead. He was bleeding. It was a frightful sight and quite a number of

us were scared. People were screaming. Out of nowhere a Catholic nun who had been around, she walked to the man who was dying and...she picked up his hand and tried his pulse. There was a weak one and she called him and he responded. She told him, "If you can talk, if you can hear me, can you confess your sins?" The man said something in a very weak voice and when he finished she had holy water which she removed from her pocket and sprinkled on him and said, "God has forgiven you." The man died, he passed away. I never forgot that scene. In my culture we fear blood, we keep away and many people had stepped aside. Here is a nun who was risking her own life in order to give the last opportunity to a robber, to a man who had been killed because he had stolen. That is the kind of love we are talking about.

It is spontaneous and courageous. It remains steadfast in the very bad storms. We are called to respond to this love; why do we often fail?

This brings me to the second part.

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### ***Living our Testimonies***

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We are known for testimonies in our lives. What is testimony in this context? One could say it is faith practised in what we do as a result of our belief. It is a witness to what we believe picked from us by the way we live our daily life. We thus write Quaker Testimonies every day of our lives wherever we are, whatever the time, at home, at work, simply everywhere. You were reminded a little while ago...about George Fox's wise words, "Walk cheerfully over the earth, answering that of God in everyone..." Every Quaker has a responsibility to respect, to nourish and to protect God's Family. Family with a capital F. If we have God's Love in our hearts we shall be able to live our testimonies of truth, equality, peace and others without any problems.

Early Quakers were seekers of *Truth*. They were well known for their relentless search of truth, and some of them were

imprisoned and yet others lost their lives in their search for truth. Truth is a great legacy passed to us: have we upheld it?

Have we allowed ourselves to settle for relative truth? Have we been afraid to uphold truth faced with a society that thrives on falsehood?

Is our Yes “Yes,” or “Yes, but...”? In our church work, are we transparent? What about our businesses? Are we transparent in all our dealings? What do we need to do to go back to George Fox’s rails of seeking for truth?

Our testimony of *Equality*. We believe that all human beings are equal. This is because we believe there is that of God in everyone. This belief in fact helps us to learn to value our differences whether in age, race, sex or culture. We learn to give respect each to the other. Diversity becomes a source of our strength.

I am a geography teacher and, if you recall, a tropical forest is a mixture of many hardwoods, climbers and bamboo and all that. All put together they form a thick tropical forest that you cannot easily penetrate.

Look at these flowers. Look at that flower arrangement. ...You get roses, you get lilies, you get violets, name them all and you put them together to form a very beautiful flower arrangement. Isn’t it? One Friend talked about a rainbow—they form a beautiful coloured arrangement together.

Our differences are part of God’s human rainbow, that other person is an important component of God’s Family.

We are commanded to feed God’s sheep and they are quite an assortment, you remember? And yet we have allowed ourselves to become slaves of our culture, our traditions, and other practices that hold some of God’s children down!

Look at our own yearly meetings and forgive me if I make repeated examples from Africa as it is the situation with which I am familiar.

What is the position of women in yearly meetings at home? When we raised a point that for a long time we have never had a woman clerking a yearly meeting in East Africa, one clerk at Lweza said, "When the women will be ready, we'll make them clerks." And we asked him, "When will they be ready?" and he said, "They need another thirty years to come." East Africa Yearly Meeting became a full yearly meeting in 1946 and up to date no single woman has been made a clerk and we are told that they still need time.

Look at the role of children in our homes and in our meetings. Do we give them any voice?

What about the girl child in Africa? In Central Province in 1993, a woman who had given birth to six girls got her seventh, and it was a girl. The mother's eyes were removed. She is still alive and she was sent out of the home with her seven daughters. And we say we live our testimony of equality! Here culture is effectively used as a weapon for discrimination.

When we had our FWCC Africa Section Triennial in Lumumba Hall, Makerere University, a number of things happened—I'll not go into details—where I was heavily reminded of *Animal Farm*, where all animals are equal but some are more equal than others. Those of you who were in Lumumba Hall will know what I am talking about. And we say we believe in equality.

What about "chiefdoms" which we have built around ourselves in our Yearly Meetings: the *pecking order* where we must show our worth, our leadership, our authority in everything we do, lest people forget our importance, our position? Here again we manipulate cultural respect to mean consent for domination. Who is to blame? Both the actor and the audience?

What is your personal experience? Look at reconciliation meetings in Kenya. What are their characteristics? Friends will portray conditional love aimed at gaining. We give conditional forgiveness. We will forgive but we shall not forget because we do not want to be seen as losers, we must

not be seen as weak, we must remain tough, “We are men.” It is not because I went to Beijing, but it is there.

God’s love is forbearing and forgiving, turning a blind eye and ear to the faults of others. God’s love is positive, believing the best about others.

God’s love is uniting, seeking always to make peace and to heal divisions.

God’s love is sensitive, taking care not to cause others to stumble. Is love the cause of disintegration of yearly meetings in Africa?

The *Peace Testimony*. Expression of peace is expression of love. We believe in peace because peace is love of mankind and love of mankind is peaceful. Peace is a central concern in every society. Peace is about caring. It is about being patient, tolerant.

We should work in all aspects of our lives towards a peaceful world. We *each* hold a “peace brick” and together we can build a peaceful world the way God intended it to be. We could do this by deliberately creating an environment where humanity is respected and valued; an environment where we are willing to sacrifice personal goals and comforts for the sake of others. An environment where we take responsibility for our action, an environment where fair play is upheld as opposed to manipulation for selfish ends.

At the United Nations Headquarters, Quakers are known and respected as peace brokers. This is in accordance to our *Peace Testimony* where we refuse war and conflict. But to broker peace we must be at peace amongst ourselves, we must be at peace with each other.

Are we peaceful in our yearly meetings? Why is peace so evasive amongst us? Is it a question of, “Do what I say and not what I do?”

Look at the strife we have had. Again I refer to situations in Kenya because that is what I am familiar with: East Africa

Yearly Meeting (North) versus Elgon Religious Society of Friends and the incidences of locked churches. I remember the girls at Lugulu High School were not able to worship in the church because this group would come and lock, that group would come and break, these men would come. There were court cases.

The story of the prodigal son—was he asked to pay back what he had been given? or what he had squandered? Did his father put him on probation? It is a case of conditional forgiveness where the base line is revenge. What has happened to our peace testimony?

Friends cannot sit with each other; they simply see one another and indeed refer to each other as that “devil.” If you talk to A, B will not talk to you because you have allied yourself with the enemy. Locked churches, police and court cases, is that the answer?

The Christian’s only method of destroying or defeating his enemy is by *loving him into friendship*. Your weapon is Love and it is a weapon that never fails, it is deadly effective.

What is the impact of this conflict in our churches? We are constantly losing young people because the church is so busy warring with itself that it has lost the vision. People have been driven from our church by the hardness and ugliness of our Christianity. We have read the Bible and preached and praised God but there has been no love in our words and actions so we have become sounding gongs, empty and hollow. Where is our Faith in Practice?

During the Triennial in Kampala, division in Uganda Yearly Meeting was visible and Tanzania Yearly Meeting has not been spared the division either. We spend our energies writing ugly letters to each other—and we want to believe we love God? Remember, if we say we love God and yet we hate our brothers, we are liars and there is no truth in us: for how can we love God whom we have never seen and hate the brother we see always?

How can Quakers be peace brokers when they have no peace themselves? How can we give what we do not have? Should we revert to being peace scholars first before we become peace brokers?

What have been your main barriers in living the peace testimony? How do you plan to resolve it?

Our Testimony of *Simplicity* can be very confusing depending on what angle one perceives it from. Does it mean denying ourselves any form of comfort? If we walk around in torn or shabby clothing, shall we be preaching our testimony of simplicity? Could it be that simplicity means we should be sensitive to other peoples' needs and hence live a life that provides basic needs but avoids unnecessary luxury? This would allow equal sharing of God's resources. Our life style should not in any way deprive some else of basic needs.

I'll tell you another little story. In Nairobi Yearly Meeting, the women from West Kenya sat together and realised that we have so many poor people at home whom we need to support. So we formed an association and the idea was to collect money and clothing and food at Christmas to give to somebody to send to the children's homes in Kakamega, in Bungoma and in Busia. Amongst us was a lady who had no home. She was living in a house made of cardboard. She had no job; she was hawking vegetables and did not have much money of her own. Usually she would come and ask if you had a job so that she could do it for you and you could give her a little money.

...When the time came for us to give whatever we had for that cause, I was one of the people who would feel, "Well, my family also need theirs." I would give saying, "OK, I will give this but my family need that."

I was touched when this lady, every time we came to give, came with a bundle of old clothing. Eventually we discovered what she was doing. She would go and clean somebody's home, be given a little money, then she would take that money and go to the second-hand shop and buy

clothing and bring it very cheerfully so that it could go with ours. At the end of the meeting usually she would have no money to get on to a bus and go home. She asked you for a lift. You would get her somewhere and she'd say, "If you leave me here, I'll get home." One day somebody drew attention to her situation and it was very shocking to find that in spite of the fact that she had nothing herself, yet she still went out to look for something to give to somebody whom she felt was in need. How many of us ever thought of doing that for someone else? We always feel that probably we do not have enough.

Now, living our testimonies, what barriers do we experience, you and I?

Is one of them jealousy, is one of them greed, hatred, perhaps selfishness or perhaps being insensitive?

These barriers, whatever their nature, make it difficult for us to respond to God's love. We are so bogged down by them that we become "Dead Christians" like the Dead Sea, which, in spite of fresh water inlets, remains dead and useless to all forms of life.

Love is faith in shoes going out to serve the least, the last and the lost.

*"Feed my sheep,"* the Lord is commanding each one of us today.

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