

It is this danger to which the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning alludes in *Sonnet 14* —

*If thou must love me, let it be for nought
Except for love's sake only. Do not say,
"I love her for her smile — her look — her way
Of speaking gently, — for a trick of thought
That falls in well with mine ..." —
For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may
Be changed, or change for thee — and love, so wrought,
May be unwrought so.*

"And love, so wrought / May be unwrought so." Yes! A love that fails to be constant and steadfast is an unwrought love. But while this may sometimes be true of *human* love, it is never true of *divine* love. So, when referring to God's love, "steadfast love" is sort of redundant. If God loves us, it most certainly will be steadfast, and it will be for "love's sake only." God does not love us for our smile, a "trick of thought," anything that pertains to our nature or what we've done to earn it. God loves us because love is what God is all about (1 John 4:7-12), and God's love is a steadfast love.

So, let's look at what the psalmist says about God's steadfast love. **First, this is a kind of love that defies description.** The psalmist struggles to explain how tremendous God's steadfast love is. After writing that God's steadfast love "extends to the heavens" and God's "faithfulness to the skies," the Psalmist uses "like": "Your righteousness is *like* the mighty mountains, your judgments are *like* the great deep" (v. 6). It's like trying to explain what orange juice tastes like. You can't. It's orange juice.

How do you adequately explain to someone how much you love them? How do you explain to your spouse how much their love for you means? It's not easy. Children will say to their parents, "I love you to the sky" or "I love you to the moon and back." Lovers might say, "You are my universe." I've even heard, "You are the butter on my grits and the gravy on my biscuits." Yup, love is hard to define.

Eugene Petersen, in *The Message*, paraphrases verses 5-6 like this: "God's love is meteoric, [God's] loyalty astronomic, [God's] purpose titanic, [God's] verdicts oceanic. Yet in [God's] largeness nothing gets lost; Not a man, not a mouse, slips through the cracks." The point is that God's steadfast love is something utterly unique in its breadth,

depth, and height. What's even more important is that we are the recipients of a love that is so incredible, it's beyond all description.

Second, this steadfast love is "precious" (v. 7). God's steadfast love is described in verses 5-6 as vast and beyond anything comparable in human experience. This makes it precious, which means that it is of *great value*, it should not be *wasted*, and it should not be *treated carelessly or casually*.

Sometimes, when we make a purchase, we say that we got a great deal, or a "great value." We love it when we're able to secure an object or service far below market value. We got a great deal on a car. We got great value on the house. God's steadfast love is a great value, a great deal. A big deal, in fact. And the best part is that it's free! There's nothing we did to earn or merit God's steadfast love. God loves us just as we are. What a deal! When we get a great deal, we take care of it. We wash the car, keep it in pristine condition. We keep the house in good repair and upkeep. And linked to this, we don't *take such deals lightly*. We treasure them. We are grateful for them. We feel blessed by them. In short, God's lovingkindness is precious: it is a great deal, we don't waste it, and we don't treat it casually.

Third, God's lovingkindness has huge benefits for us. The psalmist extols God's steadfast love because it is a place of refuge for him (v. 7). When our world seems to collapse around us, there is one place of safety, and that is the knowledge that God's love surrounds us. It gives us peace in the storm.

God's steadfast love also has the benefit of nurturing us and making us stronger for the trials and tests that come our way (v. 8). Experiencing the love and mercy of God is like feasting at a banquet and having our fill. Plenty to drink, too. We are refreshed when we feed on and drink in the abundance of God's love. Moreover, God's love has the benefit of illuminating our way as we navigate the uncharted and turbulent seas of life. "*In your light we see light*," writes the Psalmist (v. 9). Great benefits come when we consciously live in the love of God.

Finally, when we experience this love, we naturally pray that it will not lapse or fail. "*O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart*" (v. 10). These six verses of Psalm 36 are the expression of someone who can't believe his good fortune. Naturally, he doesn't want this fountain of blessing

to dry up. He prays that it will continue. He prays that nothing will come between him and God knowing him and loving him. He is concerned that his heart will continue to be upright before God.

The Psalmist wants to make sure that he doesn't screw up a good thing. Which could happen because we're not perfect people. We're going to wander and make mistakes. But the good news is that God's love is steadfast even when we are not. As the prophet Micah writes, *"You will not stay angry with your people forever, because you delight in showing unfailing love"* (7:18).

When all is said and done, we find ourselves transformed by God's unrelenting and unfailing love. God's steadfast love changes us. We discover that we are beginning to love in a way that more closely mirrors God's love. In fact, that looks a lot like the love the apostle Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13: *"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends"* (vv. 4-8).

This is steadfast love. This is a love that if we strung all its attributes together it would look like *steadfast-unrelenting-unfailing-patient-believing-hoping-enduring-love*. This is amazing love! This love comes from God who is transforming us moment by moment and day by day. As we meet today to set our course for the coming year, it is good for us to remember God's steadfast love toward us, a love which propels us into the community to share that same kind of steadfast love with our neighbors.

Prayer: Dear God, we thank you that you are a loving, gracious God. We thank you that you've offered us forgiveness and the gift of new life in you. We thank you that your love is perfect, steadfast, and that nothing can separate us from your love. We pray that our lives would be filled and overflowing with the power of your love so we can make a difference in this world and bring honor to you. We ask for your help in reminding us that the most significant thing we can do in this life is simply to love you and to choose to love others. Help us to love as you love. Fill us with your Spirit so that we can choose what is best. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Stead-fast-love

January 20, 2019

Psalm 36:5-10

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

When I was in middle school – a long, long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away – I took an introductory course in languages. My school required all seventh-grade students to take a semester of French, German, Spanish, and Latin. Then we decided which language we wanted to study. Of course, I chose Latin: a dead language with no practical use. And, of course, I took five years of it. Sometimes I look back on my life choices and wonder what I was thinking?

Well, at the time, I was thinking that I didn't want to study French, Spanish, or German. I specifically shied away from German because most German words are so darn long and complicated! Mark Twain agreed: he is reported to have said, "Some German words are so long that they have perspective." The German language has a thing for compound words. Some German compound words are fun, like *Handschuh*, literally "hand shoe," but meaning "glove" or *Kühlschrank*, literally "cool cupboard," but meaning "refrigerator."

Of course, English has its share of compound words, too: toothbrush, football, blackboard, passport, schoolhouse, and grandmother, to name a few. But the compound word I want to focus on this morning is found in verses 5, 7, and 10 of Psalm 36. It's the Hebrew word *hesed*, which means "blessed." "In English, *hesed* is usually translated as "lovingkindness," but sometimes, as in our version of Psalm 36, it's rendered as "steadfast love."

So, we have this expression "steadfast love" three times in our text, and we know that when the Bible repeats the same word or phrase over and over, it must be important. We might argue that the phrase "steadfast love" is a little bit redundant. Isn't love, by definition, steadfast? What kind of love is not constant and steadfast? If this is what you think, you'd be right. True love is steadfast. But, in truth, only God can love perfectly. Human love often falters. And when love fails to persevere or to be steadfast, it is no longer love but sentimentality.