

The Love that Surpasses Knowledge

Ephesians 3:14-21

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God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. Of course God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. This is the God who created the heavens and the earth. This is the one of whom it is said, “With God nothing is impossible.” Of course God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.

Where does that take your imagination? Some friends who worked with young people used to send the youth group out on a bigger and better hunt. They would go to a house and ask for anything the family would give them. The family might give something like a hammer or a can of chili beans or an old t-shirt. Then, with that gift in hand, they would head to the next house, explain what they were doing, show what they had, and ask if the family had something bigger and better they could give them. Stories are told of kids showing up at church a couple of hours later with couches and televisions and even a washing machine. So when we hear that God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, does that mean we ought to engage God in a game of bigger and better.

I mean if Jesus fed 5,000 people with just several fish and a few loaves of bread, does this passage encourage us to let our imagination run free? Why doesn't God feed 50,000...or 50 million? Why not upgrade the menu and try some filet-a-fish sandwiches, or have a clambake...which we discovered in Rhode Island is code for lobster...yum. If God is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine, let's ask God for a feast and the finest of food on the fanciest of place settings.

If Jesus walked on the water, if Moses parted the Red Sea, couldn't God give us some of those same powers? That sure would go a long ways to solving all the trouble we are having in Rhode Island and throughout our nation with decaying bridges. Imagine if we could walk on water, if we could part the Pawcatuck River, if we could drive in vehicles that floated on the sea

and Block Island was just a short drive. Praise the Lord he is able to do more than we ask or imagine, because we can ask for and we can imagine a lot.

If God made the sun go backwards, imagine God turning back the sun on our lives, resetting the clock a bit. What if you could turn back the sun several years, or decades, and have a do over. Talk about removing wrinkles and restoring eyesight. Imagine if we sent the sun back and we all got to be twenty five years old, or whatever your ideal age would be?

Imagine Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. If he did that, would it be too much to request from God a permanent pedicure and monthly manicures, maybe with an extra dose of exfoliation. If David slayed Goliath with a single smooth stone couldn't God give us the firepower to destroy all of our enemies. If Solomon had a crown of gold and a palace that made the Queen of Sheba swoon, imagine what we could ask for when it comes to riches and treasures and earthly pleasures.

Maybe that is where Paul wants our minds to go when he tells us God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. Maybe Paul wants us to have a spiritual bigger and better hunt, taking what God has already done and multiplying and expanding and enlarging until every one of our needs and wants and wishes and desires have been fulfilled. Maybe that is where Paul wants our minds to go.

Then again, maybe that is not where Paul wants our minds to go. It seems that when God performed some of the miracles that we think so much of, those miracles didn't really draw the people closer to God. God parted the Red Sea and the next thing you know the Israelites are complaining and afraid and want to go back to Egypt. God fed the Israelites manna from heaven for forty years, and some of them decided they wanted to play a game of bigger and better with God. They grumbled that all God did was give them the same old fare day after day after day...and they wanted more. They wanted garlics and leeks and fruits and vegetables. The mother of James and John, two of the disciples who followed Jesus, came with a request that her sons sit on the thrones on the right and left of Jesus when he came in his kingdom. She wanted more for her sons. Her sons wanted more. Jesus said seek what is less, learn to be a servant. Jesus didn't buy into bigger and

better. He wanted humble and lowly, for himself, and for his followers. Jesus saw people trying to gain all of the world with all of its treasures and pleasures and he said, “What good will it do if you gain the whole world, but lose your soul.” For Jesus bigger was not better. When he fed the 5,000, and when crowds started following him, in the Gospel of John he says the only reason the crowds were following him was because he fed them. If he did not feed they would not follow. Apparently Jesus was not in search of disciples who follow because they are fed.

Bigger and better might be a strategy that makes sense to us, because we live in a world that measures success and achievement and worth by what you do and what you have and how popular you are and how deep your pockets are and by how big your house or kingdom or crown is. So yes, God is able to immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. But it turns out God is in the process of setting our imagination on a new course, to lead our asking and seeking and finding in a new direction.

What we find in Ephesians 3:14-21 is that Paul is kneeling before the Father in heaven and he is praying. His prayer is that God would strengthen the believers through the power of the Spirit, so that Christ may dwell in their hearts, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts. With Christ in our hearts, we do become involved in a bigger and better hunt of sorts, but it is radically different from the bigger and better hunts that signal success in this world. The bigger and better hunt that is proposed in Ephesians 3 is to discover just how huge and immense the love of God is that he has for us. Talk about immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine. Is there any way we can ever understand, even in the smallest measure, how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ? The more we know, the more we realize we will never know the full extent of God’s love. It really is more than we could ever ask or imagine. Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3 builds on the prayer and expands on the prayer that he prayed in the first chapter of the letter. In that prayer he prayed that we would come to know Jesus better. The bigger and better hunt we are involved in is to experience the love of God in ever bigger ways as we learn how wide and deep and long and high his love is for us, and through that amazing love we come to know Jesus Christ better.

The Bible gives us many assurances that one day God will act in way that completely remakes and renews and restores this world through the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. The promises let us know that the healing and reconciliation will be so complete that the wolf will live with the lamb, that a table will be set where everyone is fed the finest of food, that everyone will have enough and that no one will be in need of anything, and that every tear will be dried and there will be no more crying or sadness or pain. Yes, God does immeasurably more than we could ever ask or imagine.

And the Bible also pushes us to see that while we wait for this grand and dramatic restoration and resurrection, we also find how deep and high and wide and long the love of God is through small things, through things the world either does not notice or calls insignificant. How else do we explain Jesus telling us in a parable that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. It is so small and tiny, what difference can it make? What impact can it make? Ah, but in the kingdom little seeds grow to be great trees. How else do we explain Jesus telling a parable about the needs that confront us every day, needs that people have for food and drink, for clothing and being welcomed, for kindness and compassion when they are sick or in prison. He doesn't ask if we did everything for everyone. He asks if we did it for one, for one person, for one person who was hungry or thirsty, one person who was naked or a stranger, one person who was sick or in prison. He asks whether we simply did it for one of the least.

Yet where many would say one is insignificant, he says whenever you did it to one of the least of these, you did it for me. He who is able to immeasurably more than we ask or imagine asks us to do the little thing, the small thing, the seemingly insignificant thing, believing that in each and every one of these little things the kingdom is coming, the kingdom is present. He asks us to do these small and seemingly insignificant things because in doing them we are getting to know Jesus better, that in each and every one of these little things are finding a new understanding of how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ.

Wouldn't it be a shame if we were so interested in testing God's immeasurable power to do more than all we ask or imagine that we missed the ways God is actively at work in our world today, the ways God is

demonstrating his immeasurable power among us even now? I hope we were not in search of bigger and better when our brothers and sisters in Christ at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina practiced forgiveness in the face of the horrible murders that took place in their church, in their sacred space, at the hands of a young man who had just sat with them for an hour in a Bible Study, and then killed nine members of their church because the young man's racism had blinded him to the value of the lives of those with black skin. I hope we were not searching for something bigger and better when one of those church members said on the day they came back to worship, "We wrap our arms around everyone. Despite the fact that there was someone who came in from the outside, we still open our arms to everyone to come into the church."¹ If we were looking for bigger and better we might have missed the immeasurable miracle God did by filling the hearts of those wounded Christians with the spirit of forgiveness and the desire to welcome all people.

I hope we weren't looking for bigger and better when some of the families who lost loved ones in the Boston Marathon Bombing chose to do something different than seek vengeance and live in bitterness. Following the trial the family of the youngest victim of the bombing, Martin Richard, who died at eight years old, the family of Martin Richard said, "He (Dzhokhar Tsarnaev) chose hate, he chose destruction, he chose death...we choose love, we choose kindness, we choose peace. This is our response to hate."² If we were looking for bigger and better we might have missed the immeasurable miracle God did by giving a grieving family another choice, a choice for peace in the face of violence.

I hope we weren't looking for something bigger and better when the brother of Ali Abu Awwad, a Palestinian, heard that an Israeli soldier had shot his brother in the head at close range. His brother's death left a son and a daughter and what Ali Abu Awwad called a "huge package of pain and loss and anger." In response Ali Abu Awwad wondered how many people he should kill, how many dead Israelis would be enough to heal his pain. Then a strange thing happened. His mother, a Palestinian activist, received a group

¹ Yamiche Alcindor, USA Today, reprinted in The Christian Century, "Resistance and mourning at Emanuel", p. 13, July 22, 2015.

² Henry Gass, The Christian Science Monitor, reprinted in The Christian Century, "Boston Bomber breaks silence to apologize, pray for victims," p. 14, July 22, 2015.

of bereaved Israeli parents into her home. Abu Awwad said, “For me, it was shocking to see an Israeli crying. I couldn’t imagine that Jewish people have tears.” That encounter led him to advocate for non-violence. He is now meeting with Jewish settlers in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, sharing his story, and working toward a just peace in the Middle East. I hope we weren’t looking for bigger and better when one man’s grief was turned into a mission for peacemaking. I hope we weren’t looking for bigger and better when this Palestinian man said, “I think nonviolence is the celebration of my existence. I used to wake up, and I would wish that I was not born. Today I wake up and I celebrate.”³ There is not much bigger or better than a human being surrounded by violence finding hope, a new beginning, and a heartfelt purpose in the words that Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

I hope we weren’t looking for something bigger and better on the morning of July 7, 1986. That is the morning a woman named Anne Lamott had this experience. “I woke up sick, shamed, hungover, and in deep animal confusion. I woke up this way most mornings. Why couldn’t I stop after 6 or 7 drinks? Why didn’t I have an ‘off’ switch when I had that first drink every day? Well, ‘Why?’ is not a useful question .I thought about having a cool refreshing beer, just to get all the flies going in one direction. I was 32, with three published books, and the huge local love of my family and life-long friends. I was loved out of all sense of proportion. I gave talks and readings that hundreds of people came to. I had won a Guggenheim Fellowship, although, like many fabulous writers, I was drunk as a skunk every day. I was penniless and bulimic, but adorable, and cherished.

But there was one tiny problem. I was dying. Oh, also, my soul was rotted out from mental illness and physical abuse. My insides felt like Swiss cheese, until I had that first cool, refreshing drink. So, not ideal. The elevator was going. It ONLY goes down; until you finally get off. As a clean, sober junkie told me weeks later, “At the end, I was deteriorating faster than I could lower my standards.” And against all odds, I picked up the 200 pound phone, and called the same sober alkie that my older brother had called two years earlier, when he had hit his coked-out bottom. The man, a Jack Lemmon type, said,

³ Christa Case Bryant, The Christian Science Monitor, reprinted in The Christian Century, “Former Palestinian fighter chooses nonviolence, p. 16, July 22, 2015.

“I will come get you at 11:30. Take a shower, and try not to drink till then. The shower is optional.”

I didn't; when all else fails, follow Instructions. I couldn't imagine there was a way out of all that sickness and self-will, all those lies and secrets, but God always makes a way out of No Way. There were all these other women who had what I had, who'd thought what I'd thought, who'd done what I'd done, who had betrayed their families and deepest values, who sat with me that day, and said Guess what? Me, too! I have that too. Let me get you a glass of water. Those are the words of salvation: Guess what? Me, too. Then I blinked, and today is my 29th recovery birthday. I hope someday it will be yours, too, or at least your 1st. Don't give up on yourself. In recovery, we never EVER give up on anyone, no matter what it looks like, no matter how long it takes. Because Grace bats last.”⁴ I hope we weren't looking for bigger and better when one single, solitary person celebrated their sobriety birthday. What a powerful experience of how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ.

I hope we weren't looking for something bigger and better when a mother died in childbirth at a mission hospital in Central Africa. The motherless baby was in grave danger of dying, and the missionary doctor, Helen Roseveare, noted they would have difficulty keeping the baby alive with no incubator and no electricity, knowing that even on the equator the nights could get chilly with treacherous drafts. She continues her story:

A student-midwife went for the box we had for such babies and for the cotton wool that the baby would be wrapped in. Another went to stoke up the fire and fill a hot water bottle. She came back shortly, in distress, to tell me that in filling the bottle, it had burst. Rubber perishes easily in tropical climates. “...and it is our last hot water bottle!” she exclaimed. As in the West, it is no good crying over spilled milk; so, in Central Africa it might be considered no good crying over a burst water bottle. They do not grow on trees, and there are no drugstores down forest pathways. All right,” I said, “Put the baby as near the fire as you safely can; sleep between the baby and the door to keep it free from drafts. Your job is to keep the baby warm.”

⁴ From Anne Lamott's blog, July 7, 2015.

The following noon, as I did most days, I went to have prayers with many of the orphanage children who chose to gather with me. I gave the youngsters various suggestions of things to pray about and told them about the tiny baby. I explained our problem about keeping the baby warm enough, mentioning the hot water bottle. The baby could so easily die if it got chilled. I also told them about the two-year-old sister, crying because her mother had died. During the prayer time, one ten-year-old girl, Ruth, prayed with the usual blunt consciousness of our African children. "Please, God," she prayed, "send us a water bottle. It'll be no good tomorrow, God, the baby'll be dead; so, please send it this afternoon." While I gasped inwardly at the audacity of the prayer, she added by way of corollary, "...And while You are about it, would You please send a dolly for the little girl so she'll know You really love her?" As often with children's prayers, I was put on the spot. Could I honestly say, "Amen?" I just did not believe that God could do this. Oh, yes, I know that He can do everything: The Bible says so, but there are limits, aren't there? The only way God could answer this particular prayer would be by sending a parcel from the homeland. I had been in Africa for almost four years at that time, and I had never, ever received a parcel from home. Anyway, if anyone did send a parcel, who would put in a hot water bottle? I lived on the equator!

Halfway through the afternoon, while I was teaching in the nurses' training school, a message was sent that there was a car at my front door. By the time that I reached home, the car had gone, but there, on the veranda, was a large twenty-two pound parcel! I felt tears pricking my eyes. I could not open the parcel alone; so, I sent for the orphanage children. Together we pulled off the string, carefully undoing each knot. We folded the paper, taking care not to tear it unduly. Excitement was mounting. Some thirty or forty pairs of eyes were focused on the large cardboard box. From the top, I lifted out brightly colored, knitted jerseys. Eyes sparkled as I gave them out. Then, there were the knitted bandages for the leprosy patients, and the children began to look a little bored. Next, came a box of mixed raisins and sultanas -- that would make a nice batch of buns for the weekend. As I put my hand in again, I felt the...could it really be? I grasped it, and pulled it out. Yes, "A brand-new rubber, hot water bottle!" I cried. I had not asked God to send it; I had not truly believed that He could. Ruth was in the front row of

the children. She rushed forward, crying out, “If God has sent the bottle, He must have sent the dolly, too!” Rummaging down to the bottom of the box, she pulled out the small, beautifully dressed dolly. Her eyes shone: She had never doubted! Looking up at me, she asked, “Can I go over with you, Mummy, and give this dolly to that little girl, so she’ll know that Jesus really loves her?”

That parcel had been on the way for five whole months, packed up by my former Sunday School class, whose leader had heard and obeyed God’s prompting to send a hot water bottle, even to the equator. One of the girls had put in a dolly for an African child — five months earlier in answer to the believing prayer of a ten-year-old to bring it “That afternoon!”⁵

Are we searching for bigger and better, taking the promise that God can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine and making it a proving ground for God? Do more. Do something bigger. Do something better. Paul believes the biggest and best thing is to know Jesus Christ. That is his prayer. His prayer is that people like you and me would come to know Christ and in knowing Christ would know how wide and long and high and deep his love is. In coming to know Christ we will see countless examples of his immeasurable power. We will see it in people choosing forgiveness and kindness and compassion and working as peacemakers. And we will see it in miracles like packages arriving that were sent five months before with just the right hot water bottle, and a doll or a little girl who needs to know God really loves her. But behind it all, in it all, through it all, the widest of the wides, the longest of the longs, the highest of the highs, and the deepest of the deeps, is that God sent his Beloved Son to prove his love for this world, suffering and dying on the cross, and then rising from the dead, victorious over sin and evil and all the darkness of this world. Bigger? Better? It doesn’t get any bigger and it doesn’t get any better than a God who shows that kind of love.

Now, to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

⁵ As told by Helen Rosevear in a testimony at Thomas Road Baptist Church