

“Transformation”

Romans 12:1,2

Wayne Eberly

June 13, 2021

There is a story that has circulated, and if it isn't true it ought to be. The story is told that Karl Barth was at the Rockefeller Chapel on the campus of the University of Chicago during his lecture tour of the U.S. in 1962. During a question and answer time after his lecture, a student asked Barth if he could summarize his whole life's work in theology in a sentence. Barth allegedly said something like “Yes, I can. In the words of a song I learned at my mother's knee, ‘Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.’”

Unless you know a little bit about Karl Barth, his summary statement might not mean very much to you. But if you knew that Karl Barth wrote a series of books entitled, “The Church Dogmatics”, a 13-volume set with more than 8,000 pages, you might have a greater appreciation for his ability to take all his knowledge of theology and the bible and summarize it in one sentence, a sentence that affirms the powerful statement that Jesus loves me and expresses how we know of the love of Jesus. The bible tells me so. The bible...the message of the bible...if you narrow it down to what is ultimately most important...the bible tells us that we are loved by Jesus.

Today as we dedicate the new Pew Bibles for the Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian, I want to do two things. One, I want to affirm the simple yet profound truth that is expressed in the phrase, “Jesus loves me this I know for the bible tells me so,” and I also want to explore just what it means to say Jesus loves me, and how the bible tells us of that amazing and sacrificial love. To begin I want to let you know why someone like Karl Barth might have said what he said about Jesus and why he might have said what he said about the bible.

As I mentioned, the Church Dogmatics stretches to 13 volumes with more than 8,000 pages. But it is not until the seventh volume, and after 4,000 other pages, that Karl Barth directly addresses something that is called the doctrine of reconciliation. When you start reading about reconciliation, you immediately realize it is not a doctrine shoved toward the second half of his work. When Karl Barth gets to reconciliation you see themes coming together and you see the gospel coming to life. The subject headings in the doctrine of Reconciliation literally speak volumes. Through the doctrine of reconciliation...

- We learn about the grace of God that is given to us in Jesus Christ.
- We learn that for us to be reconciled to God, it is of critical importance that Jesus be both fully human and fully divine. What a miracle that in Jesus, the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us.
- We learn that as the Messiah, the one who was both fully God and fully human, Jesus served as a mediator, literally bringing us into a profound and personal relationship with God.

Barth's writing is so meaningful because his words are not simply doctrine. He tells a story of salvation that both breaks your heart and brings joy to the deepest places in your soul. Barth writes about the obedience of the Son of God. God did not simply send Jesus. The eternal Son of God went with obedience, and the eternal Son of God became human because of God's great love. There is a section in the Dogmatics that describes *The Way of the Son of God into the Far Country*. The title alone evokes images of the Prodigal Son, but now instead of a son who leaves his father and wastes the family wealth, we have a Son who in obedience goes to the far country himself, to rescue and redeem God's precious children.

But it is not until late in the volume on reconciliation that we understand the full impact of what God is doing through Jesus Christ. According to Barth there comes a moment, a moment of faith, a moment of awakening, a moment of reconciliation, where the child of God looks

at everything God has done, the great faithfulness, the great sacrifice, the great love, and realizes it was all done as Barth puts it, “Just for me.”¹ Christ Jesus became a servant “Just for me.” It was just my place that Jesus took on the cross. Jesus died “Just for me.” It was just my pride, just my fall which was overcome. And it was just me that was filled with the Holy Spirit. Barth even says Jesus did not will to be Jesus without being just my Jesus. The world was not to be reconciled with God without just me as an isolated individual being an individual who is reconciled to God. The whole occurrence of salvation was not to take place but just for me. In other words, Jesus loves me this I know...I know...I know...for the bible tells me so. And although it is just for me, that in no way means it is not equally just for you.

In the summer of 1992 Julie had an incredible opportunity to go on a short-term mission to the country of Albania. Albania had been one of the most restrictive countries under the oppressive rule of communism. Christianity was outlawed. People were put in jail for having bibles. When the Iron Curtain came tumbling down, Christians were finally allowed to enter Albania and share with people the story of God’s love that was given through Jesus Christ. There were stories circulating that as people were given a bible, they would read the bible. And after reading the bible they would open their hearts to God and accept the love that was given through Jesus Christ. Just through reading the word of God. It was as if all those long years of being denied the good news of salvation were swept away and God’s love rushed in and filled the void where previously only sadness and sorrow had lived. Julie came home from Albania and she and the mission team taught all of us who had stayed home a song. The song was in Albanian. You might not recognize the words, but I bet you recognize the tune. Jezusi me do...kata biblia...In every tongue with every tribe and every nation and every person, the truth of the song hits home. Jesus loves me this I know...for the bible tells me so.

¹ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics IV.1, The Doctrine of Reconciliation, p. 754.

When we sing about the love of Jesus that is told to us in the pages of the bible, the love of Jesus is a deep and profound love. Jesus himself said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he would lay down his life for his friend." Because of the words of the bible, we have a clear understanding of just how Jesus showed us this great love that would lay down its own life. In sign language, the name Jesus is given by touching the palm of the hand with the finger of the other hand. Why does touching the palm of the hand signify Jesus? If we know what Jesus did for us, we know exactly why we touch the palm of the hand. His hands bear the mark of the nails, the nails that pierced him when he hung on the cross. And we must never forget, he died on the cross because he loves us. Jesus loves me...amazing love how can it be, that thou my God shouldst die for me. (Charles Wesley)

The love of Jesus that we are told about in the bible, the great love that would lay down its own life for the sake of others, is a love that transforms lives in marvelous and mysterious ways. Ernest Gordon's book *Through the Valley of the Kwai* recounts his experience as a prisoner of war during World War II. He and his fellow prisoners were all fighting to survive. Their mindset was self-preservation. "My pay is my own, isn't it? I can do with it as I please. We're all in a tough spot; but I need everything I can get for myself. When the chips are down, it's a case of to hell with everyone else. Too bad, but that's the way life is." This was the mindset that pervaded the prisoner of war camp. It was not a mindset of love, and certainly not a love that would lay down its life for another.

Then a story started circulating through the camp. A man named Angus started doing some strange things. Angus had a close friend, a man with whom he had thrown everything in. This type of close friend was called a mucker. Angus' mucker had become sick. Angus began to sneak out of camp to get medicine for his mucker. Angus went hungry so his mucker could have enough to eat. He cared for him. He nursed him. And Angus' mucker got better. Then Angus collapsed. Just slumped down and died. When Angus died, Ernest Gordon was

suffering from ulcers on his legs. A man named Dusty was cleaning his ulcers, and Dusty is the one who told Ernest the story of Angus. After Ernest Gordon heard the story of Angus and his sacrificial death, Gordon asked Dusty, “Do you remember that verse from St. John? ‘Greater love hath no man...’”

“Yes, I remember it,” Dusty said, nodding. “I’ve always thought it one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament: ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’” Dusty stood without moving. Then he said, “That’s for Angus, all right.”

“By some ways of reckoning,” said Ernest, “what Angus did might seem foolish.”

“But in other ways,” Dusty returned, “it makes an awful lot of sense.”²

What stands out to me in this story is not simply what Angus did. His act of sacrificial love was truly beautiful. But what really grabs me is what follows. As a result of Angus giving his life, others begin to give. They begin to share food. They begin to buy medicine for the sick. They begin to nurse and watch over the weak. They even begin to take on the punishments due to others. One man laid down his life for another man. Others were so touched, so convicted, they began to lay down their lives.

Isn’t that what the Apostle Paul is telling the church in Rome. “In view of God’s mercy...” In view of God’s mercy that was shown so clearly when Jesus proved his love for all of us by laying down his own life, “In view of God’s mercy, offer yourself as a living sacrifice...do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Transformed. The love of Christ that is told to us in the pages of the bible is a love that transforms us. As we

² Ernest Gordon, “Through the Valley of the Kwai”, pgs 103, 104

understand the outpouring of grace and mercy that comes to us through Jesus Christ, we are changed, we are transformed, we become a new creation. All because Jesus loves us...and we know Jesus loves us because the bible tells us in no uncertain terms how real and tangible that love is...the palms of his hands, the crown of thorns on his head, his body given for us, his blood poured out, they are all signs of a love that will not let us go...a love that will never let us go. Jesus loves me this I know for the bible tells me so.

One Sunday I was performing a baptism for a family and their newborn child. We were serving the church in Houston at the time. All of the children at church gathered at the front to watch the baptism up close and personal. I talked with the children about baptism and how it is a sign and symbol of God's grace, and how even though this tiny little baby couldn't even talk yet, they had already been surrounded by God's love and they already belonged to God. I talked about how baptism is a symbol of our belonging, that we are all baptized into one family, and I encouraged the children to be a friend to this precious little one as the child grew up in our church family. Then I stood and walked over to the mom and dad and they handed me their child. As I held the child, I noticed one of the children from church had decided to get up and walk over with me. She had decided she was going to help me with the baptism.

My surprise helper that morning happened to be a young girl in our church with special needs. She didn't understand that she was supposed to stay seated and that I would go over and perform the baptism. She had heard me ask the children to be a friend to this new baby, and so she decided what better time to begin a friendship than the present. So she walked up with me. It could have been awkward. But baptism is about belonging, about being a community, about every person having a place in the family. My friend Jordan stood with me and the family at the baptism that day, and afterward numerous people said it was the most meaningful baptism they had ever experienced. This girl with special

needs knew she belonged in our church family. She knew Jesus loved her.

If that is all that happened, you might think the Bible is all about belonging and loving and community and being included. Well, the church is not perfect. Something happened a few years later and the mother of that special young woman with special needs stepped away from church. I never knew for sure what happened, but I cannot begin to imagine the challenges a parent faces as they raise a child with special needs. Somehow something happened and feelings were hurt. Whatever reason, the mother stepped away. A relationship was broken. I hope you know that type of thing breaks a pastor's heart. We kept the door open, hoped for reconciliation, and confessed again and again that we are not perfect.

In the fall of 2013 Julie and I organized a trip to Greece and Turkey, The Footsteps of St. Paul. People signed up to go. One day I looked at the sign-up sheet and the young girl with special needs had her name on the list. By now she was a young woman. Her dad signed up to go, signed up his daughter, the one with the special needs, signed up their son, and he signed up his wife, the mom, the one we had disappointed as a church. She was going on the trip with us.

The first several days were nice. We were so happy to have her with us. But there was still a distance. She was watching to see how people treated her daughter, the one with special needs. About the third or fourth day we had stopped as a group at one of the memorials. The memorial where we stopped was in Berea. The memorial is in the middle of a business district. Well, that didn't matter to our group. We stopped and had a worship service. I was leading the service, and people were sharing their favorite bible verses. I thought of those Bereans, the ones Paul met so many years ago, as I prepared for our Sunday celebrating the word of God, our Sunday rejoicing in the gift of the bible. You see, the Bereans were noted for how they searched the Scriptures. The Bereans took the bible seriously. On that day in 2013 I

invited every person to stand up and share what Bible verse was meaningful to them. It was a really special time. While I was standing up leading the service, the young girl with special needs got up from her seat, walked up to the front, and stood right next to me. Just like the baptism years before, she knew she belonged and so she came up front to help me out. I wrapped my arm around her and the two of us led the service. Everyone shared their verses, we prayed, and then we sang a song. In its own way, each verse said the same thing. “Jesus loves me this I know for the bible tells me so.”

But the mom of the girl had not shared. After we finished singing, we got ready to leave and travel to our next stop. At that moment the mom came forward and asked if she could say a few words. I was still standing next to her daughter. Her daughter was convinced she was in charge, so I turned to her daughter and asked if it was okay if her mom said a few words. With a big smile she shook her head yes. So the mom talked. She talked about the disappointment and about stepping away. But then she said there had been healing. She said she had seen once again on the trip how her daughter truly was loved and accepted by every single person. And she said she was ready for a new beginning. Right there in Berea, a town known for people who believed in the power of the bible to bring salvation and transformation and restoration and reconciliation, we joined hands in a big circle and we sang a song. We sang a song about the love of Jesus. And we sang a song that tells us how we know about this amazing love of Jesus. We sang, “Jesus loves me this I know for the bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong they are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me the bible tells me so. When I look back on the verses people chose that day in Berea, I found the one that particular family chose. It is one that just about says Jesus loves me this I know. It just about says it, but it says it in these words, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Watching a mother find her place again in the community of faith...watching her daughter who had no doubt whatsoever but that she belonged...being in a circle with people who had experienced a lifetime worth of joy and sorrow, laughter and tears, disappointments and blessings, and listening as we all sang together about how the bible tells us that no matter what life brings our way, there is nothing in all creation that can keep us from the love of God...the love God has given us in Jesus Christ, the words of the prophet Isaiah were never more real to me than that day. The word of God will not return void. It will accomplish everything God intends.

It was never more real to me than that day...except for every other day...except for every other day when we, the people of God, take God's word personally. Not selfishly. We don't hold God's word and say it's all mine and no one else can have it. But when we take God's word personally, we say, "It was just for me." And then we look to our left and to our right and we see something beautiful. We see brothers and sisters in faith, and we know they are saying the same thing. It's just for me. And it is. It is just for each and every one of us.

Yes, Jesus loves me...and yes, Jesus loves you...and yes, Jesus loves each one of us. How do we know? The bible tells me so.