

“Grasping the love of Christ”

Ephesians 3:14-21

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Paul prays that his beloved friends in Ephesus, which many think was a letter intended to be read by a much larger audience than just the Ephesians, Paul prays that his beloved friends would be able to grasp the breadth and expanse of the love that has come to human beings in Jesus Christ. He prays that his beloved friends would be able to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. In essence Paul is praying for people to grasp the ungraspable. How could human beings ever grasp the width, length, height, and depth of a love that is infinite, without measure, limitless, boundless, everlasting, and eternal? How can anyone grasp that type of love, the love of Christ? Peter might not have known completely, in full, in its entirety, just how wide and high and deep and long Christ’s love was, but Peter knew something. When others turned away, when others turned their backs on Jesus, when others said, “No thanks!”, Peter said, “Where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Peter might not have known every bit about how wide Christ’s love was, but Peter was there when Jesus had to go through Samaria, just had to go through land that was off limits, had to venture out in the heat of the day, at the hottest hour, at high noon, had to go through Samaria just so he could meet a woman at the well. How wide is the love of Christ? Peter had a pretty good idea.

Peter might not have known every bit about how long Christ’s love was, but Peter was there when Jesus told a story about a son who went away to a far-off land, a land a long, long way from home, a land completely different from the Father’s house. And we know how that beautiful story ends up. That long road of wandering was no match for the long arm of God, who reached across the barren land of sin and shame to wrap that lost child in his arms. How long is the love of Christ? Peter had a pretty good idea.

Peter might not have known every bit about how high Christ’s love was, but Peter was there when Jesus, a carpenter by trade, not averse to

giving a few pointers to some fisherman, with an impressive background as a sommelier, and pretty good at serving up a heaping portion of loaves and fishes, Peter was there when Jesus hitched up his robe and climbed up a tree, just so he could have a little sit down with a fellow named Zacchaeus, a fellow who was a tax-collector, a fellow who was despised as a sinner. How high is the love of Christ? Peter had a pretty good idea.

Peter might not have known every bit about how deep Christ's love was, but he watched Jesus climb into the pit of despair with the leper, with the lame, with the deaf, with the blind, with the ones desperately crying out for healing and wholeness, with the ones who mourned for their sinfulness with tears of sadness. How deep is the love of Christ? Peter had a pretty good idea. When others turned away, when others turned their backs on Jesus, when others said, "No thanks!", Peter said, "Where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

How wide is the love of Christ? When we were living in California we would travel down to Mexico and do short-term mission trips. One year we were sent to put on a Vacation Bible School for the children and to offer various ministries for the women in a community that had been built on top of a garbage dump. Our youth group started a soccer game. Their field was literally littered with refuse. The houses were no more than lean-tos. The poverty was unbelievable.

Julie was working with the women's ministry. She fell in love with these women who were doing their best to make a home in the middle of a garbage dump. Late in the week the women were talking about things they liked to do. They asked Julie, "What is your favorite thing to do?" She told them she loved to have coffee with her friends. The ladies smiled and asked, "How do you like your coffee?" Julie said with milk. If you know Julie, you know she likes her coffee with milk. Caffe con leche! Mucho leche! The women's heads sank down. Milk was a rare commodity in the garbage dump.

The next morning when Julie showed up in the village, the ladies were buzzing with excitement. They grabbed her and led her to one of their homes. It was nothing more than a cardboard shack. But they were all smiles. They pulled back a blanket, which was the front door, and

welcomed her. Inside the house was a pot of coffee and some makeshift chairs. They had a plate of tiny cookies they had bought. They served everyone coffee. But they only filled Julie's cup half full. And then with as much joy as they would have had serving a queen, they brought out some milk. They filled her coffee cup with milk. Right in the middle of a garbage dump, across a man-made border, in the foreign country known as Mexico, these poor but generous women, filled her cup with milk. Julie said that day it didn't seem like a garbage dump. She thought she was in heaven. The psalm came true that day for Julie. "My cup runneth over." How wide is the love of Christ? Wide enough to cross every border and to unite every heart in every country and every continent on this whole wide world.

How long is the love of Christ? I was leading a class for seminary students, doing my best to help them as they were learning how to preach the gospel. One of the students stood up when it was his turn to preach. This is what he said.

"Seven years ago, I packed my bags and together with a handful of Christians from around the world, we moved to Canada's poorest and most dysfunctional neighborhood, Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. This small, four by eight city block area is home to 3000 homeless, 5000 cocaine and heroin addicts, and over a thousand prostitutes. Cheap and potent drugs from the nearby ports have destroyed this community. Walking down the streets each day I would pass scores of people shooting up in plain sight, and on virtually every block a woman would ask me if I was lonely. A homeless friend of mine once described the Downtown Eastside as a valley of skeletons, a valley filled with emaciated corpses eaten away by drugs."

As this student continued, he told us his sermon text was from Ezekiel 37, a story of a valley of dry bones. The question is whether God has the ability to bring life to those dry bones.

"For those of us who had relocated to the Downtown Eastside, we sensed God calling us to a ministry of hospitality. That was our job, our role to play. Now, Martha Stewart and the whole multi-billion dollar Hospitality Industry have co-opted that word to mean the entertainment of friends. But biblical hospitality is about the

welcoming in of those people who are not normally the recipients of welcome. So we opened up our home, and welcomed our neighbors in, treating them like family. They'd cook with us, eat with us, cry with us, celebrate with us, and even live with us while they waited to get into a drug rehab program. And as we'd share life together, we saw the lives of many neighbors restored.

“One guy, his name is Kevin, he used to shoot heroin into his veins just down the street from our house. One day, while still in addiction, he heard a teammate of mine speak about ministry in Cambodia. Afterwards, Kevin declared that God was calling him to be a missionary amongst the poor in Cambodia. This was too preposterous of an idea for me to believe. Thankfully, my teammate Craig believed that dry bones can live. So he started mentoring Kevin.... For the past four years, Kevin has been living and ministering in a poor slum community in Cambodia. And he's an amazing missionary! In fact, this year, he'll be a keynote speaker at the International Society of Urban Missions.”¹ How long is the love of Christ? The love of Christ walked down the long road of addiction, brought life to the dry bones of a heroin addict, and then sent that redeemed and renewed man down another long road, all the way to Cambodia, where now in a poor slum, others are hearing the good news of the love of Christ.

How deep is the love of Christ? Traveling with the mission group “Faith in Practice” to Guatemala, we have had many opportunities to help others. When we traveled in October Julie was working with the group that was assembling wheelchairs. They called it the mobility clinic. One morning at 8:09 am an elderly woman was carried into the mobility clinic on a plastic chair. Claudia, a staff member from Guatemala interviewed the woman. Julie and Byron, another member of the Guatemalan staff began building a wheelchair. Yet another Guatemalan staff member, Jackie, a physical therapist fit the woman for her chair. The team surrounded the woman and her son for a group photo. Then the woman was wheeled out. The elderly woman arrived in

¹ Sermon preached by Jason Porterfield for Fuller Seminary Homiletics Course, Fall 2013

her plastic chair at 8:09 am, and she left in her brand-new wheelchair at 8:35 am, with a happy heart and huge smile. Sometimes you help someone, and it feels pretty darn good.

Other times we are not able to help, not in the way we want to help, and not in the way a person needs to be helped. Several years ago, we met a young girl who had been diagnosed with a spinal condition that was affecting her ability to walk. She began to have signs of this disease as an eight-year-old. When we met her, she was just eleven years of age. She could no longer walk. Sadly, there was no healing for her. All we could do was give her a walker. For the rest of the week this beautiful little girl gamely made her way around the clinic using her walker...and smiling.

Late in the week one of our dentists pulled me aside in the morning, before we went to clinic. She had travelled from the Texas town of Wichita Falls. She had told some of her friends about the mission trip she was doing. Before she left for our trip, one of her friends gave her a Spanish language Bible and said, "Find the right person and give them this Bible." Because our dentist friend, Doctor Tina, was in clinic all day, she handed me the Bible and said, "Find just the right person." Watching the little girl with her walker, facing a lifetime of challenges, and smiling through it all, I knew who the right person was. I went in the dental clinic, waited for Doctor Tina to extract yet another tooth. When she finished, I motioned for her to come with me. We found the little girl, whose name was Evelyn. We told her we had been sent with a special gift for a very special person, and that we felt like she was the perfect person to receive the gift. Tina took the Bible, placed it in the small hands of Evelyn, and we prayed for her. We couldn't stretch our skills far enough to heal the spinal condition which was crippling this precious little girl named Evelyn. She was not healed that day. We did not heal her, not physically, but we placed in her hands that day a book that tells the amazing story of a God who loves us so much he came down all the way down from heaven, wrapping himself in human flesh, coming to a world that was deep in the pit of despair, and making his home among us, as one of us. We gave Evelyn a bible, the book that tells all about the deep, deep love of Jesus. When Evelyn

received that bible, that bible that tells us of the deep, deep love of Jesus, tears filled her eyes and she smiled. O, the deep, deep love of Jesus, what a blessing, what a gift, what a comfort, what a hope.

How high is the love of Christ? The love of Christ was high enough to climb up a tree and have a sit down with Zacchaeus. The love of Christ is at least that high. I can also say with certainty, the love of Christ is at least seventeen steps high, whatever that would be in terms of elevation. Two years ago, right about this time, on Sunday March 16, 2020, I walked up the seventeen steps from my office downstairs to this door right here and I entered our sanctuary. The sanctuary was empty. In those first days of the COVID lockdown, everything was empty. The Roman Coliseum, Theatre's on Broadway, College basketball arenas, the Louvre, the shelves at the grocery stores, the schools that are home to our children, our youth, our college students...everything was empty. That word empty describes to a T how I felt that Sunday morning when I walked into our sanctuary, and it was empty. For a long moment it seemed that no matter how high the love of Christ is, it was not high enough to climb seventeen steps. This sanctuary felt so empty.

For a long moment it felt like even though the love of Christ was high, it might not be high enough to climb the seventeen steps of COVID that left our sanctuary empty. Have you ever felt like maybe the love of Christ is high, but moments come in life when you just are not sure his love is high enough? When we are lonely...we wonder. When we have suffered a loss...we wonder. When life doesn't turn out the way we hoped...we wonder. When loved ones are hurting...we wonder. When relationships are broken...we wonder...When sin just won't let go, and we see the hatred and violence, the racism, the cruelty, and the wars...we wonder. Is the love of Christ high enough to cover all the sin and sadness that fill this world to overflowing? Is the love of Christ high enough to cover the emptiness that rises like a mighty mound of misery?

That morning two years, for a long moment I wondered if the love of Christ was high enough. The sanctuary was empty, and I wondered if the love of Christ was high enough. And then Jesus reminded me he could do so much more than climb the seventeen steps of COVID and enter the emptiness of our sanctuary and the emptiness that had wreaked

havoc on our nation and world. Jesus reminded me that he had climbed to the highest heights when he climbed the cross of Calvary. When we face our emptiness, we do not face it alone. We face our emptiness surrounded by the love of the one who emptied himself for our sake. Because he emptied himself on the cross, his love reaches out and never ends...there is no limit to how wide and long and deep and high Christ's love is for this world.

Paul, who wrote those words about Christ's love also gave us the words about how Christ emptied himself...so that in our emptiness we would never doubt that God's love is right there with us. "Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he emptied himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross." How high is the love of Christ? About as high as the cross that was planted on the hill of Calvary, that old rugged cross on which Jesus died. That cross was high enough to save this world.

When others turned away, when others turned their backs on Jesus, when others said, "No thanks!", Peter said, "Where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life." How about us? This is not an easy time to be the church. Some are walking away...some seem to have turned their backs...some seem to have said, "No thanks!" But we are here. Why are we here? My guess is we are here because we are like Peter. When others turn away, when others turn their backs, when others say, "No thanks", we turn toward Jesus, we come to Jesus, we follow Jesus, we cling to Jesus, and we say, "Where else can we go? You alone, Jesus, you alone have the words of eternal life." That's just how it is when we begin to grasp how wide and how long and how deep and how high Christ's love truly is.

So Paul finishes that stirring chapter on the love of Christ with these words, "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!" And may the people of God say, "Amen!"

