

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Ephesians 3:7-21

"Christ's Love"

God's great plan is through Jesus Christ, by faith in him, to reconcile all people and all things under him. This great plan, says Paul, has only now been fully revealed to people like him in the 1st century, having been hidden from ages past. How did all this happen?

It was God who initiated the reconciliation plan, and Israel was supposed to implement it but had "dropped the ball," thinking it was all about them! They had become part of the problem of a fallen world in need of reconciliation, but now Jesus, the "one true Israelite," had done what was needed to defeat the "powers of evil," and so to reconcile firstly people to God and God to people, and secondly Jews to Gentiles and Gentiles to Jews.

He made them "one people," the "new people of God" - also called Christians, also called the Church of Jesus Christ, and signaled by this to the "powers of evil" that he would not allow them to succeed in their "divide and conquer" strategy using racial and ethnic prejudices. Self-evidently, this project did not yet include everyone or everything: many people did not have faith in Jesus, and not all Jews and Gentiles were reconciled. The Church was therefore a sort of "pilot project" to show how reconciliation would work, and there was much work yet to be done.

1) *Power and Love*

What God knew, and Paul had had revealed to him, was that the next stage would require the Church to acquire things they already dimly knew about, but would need in abundance to carry out their "ministry of reconciliation." So Paul continues to pray that this good church in Ephesus would, by deepening their faith, experience the power of the Spirit of God that even now lived in them and among them. The work of the Spirit was to reveal God's truth, wisdom, plan, will; but also - and supremely - to make the presence and power of the risen Christ real to people.

"May God strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." How would this happen, and with what result? The "how" was instructive: the Spirit would use the preaching of men like Paul. And that not because Paul was brilliant (tho' he was), but because God in his grace calls people who he can use because they know they do not deserve it. Paul had persecuted the Christians, had watched and approved the stoning of Steven, the first Christian martyr, had dragged Jesus' disciples from their homes, made them appear before councils, had them imprisoned as a threat to the traditional Jewish way of doing things.

But the risen Jesus had confronted Paul, and converted him, and shown him that the great mystery of God's plan was that it relied on

grace, and not on “deserving” people. Paul grasped that: he was now called to preach the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles, even though he was *“less than the least of all God’s people”* – an idea so powerful for Paul that he has to make up a new word in Greek to describe it: literally he calls himself *“the lessermost.”*

So God’s determined plan, Christ’s incarnation and life and death and rising and exaltation, the Spirit’s coming on believers at Pentecost, and the preaching of “lessermost” people like Paul, were together leading Christians to new knowledge of God and new experiences of him. In particular, Paul prays that the power of the Spirit will make them able to grasp God’s grace, know the vast extent of the love of Christ, and assure them that they can now *“approach God with freedom and confidence.”*

Grounded already in faith, in love, in Christ, if they will continue in this, they will be *“filled with the fullness of God;”* and in case they doubt that these things are possible, Paul reminds them that God’s power within and among them can do *“immeasurably more than all we ask or even imagine.”*

2) Christ’s Great Love

So for Christians in the 1st century or the 21st, what would it be like, for example, *“to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ”*?

Well, let’s run with that metaphor of “size and dimensions.” How *long* is the love of God in Christ? Long enough to take us from one end of life to the other – and beyond. For a child, to know that “God loves me” and so “we should love each other” is the foundation of a secure and flourishing life. That’s what we teach our youngest children in Sunday School; that’s what we should all

as parents and grandparents teach our children at home. God loves you.

But the love of Christ is also long enough to take us through that extended stage we used to call “the teenage years,” but which in our culture now goes from about 12 to – what? – 28-30 years old? The stage where we discover ambition, and success, and failure, and love, and sadness, and sin. The stage where the love of Christ in lifting fallen but repentant people from the pit becomes necessary knowledge if we are to survive this stage intact and hopeful, not depressed and crushed.

The love of Christ can take us through our 40s and 50s and 60s – that extended American “middle age” when we learn our limits, as well as our capabilities; earn our prizes and our applause, but also discover we “can’t have it all.” Grace begins to mean a lot as we begin to know ourselves better. The love of Christ is long enough to take us through our 70s and 80s, and perhaps 90s, when tranquility can come, but strength and memory begin to fail, and loss and loneliness become familiar. The presence and love of Jesus Christ now and forever becomes more and more precious.

How *high* is the love of Christ? High enough to go with us to the peaks of this life, and teach us that their brevity and their bittersweet taste are reminders that there is more to life than success. How *deep*? Christ’s love is there to hold us when we go into the depths, and we know we can’t do what needs to be done ourselves. How *wide*? Enough to keep us in his will even when we wander all over the place, take diversions and wrong turns; and wide enough to include all kinds of people who we might not have thought of walking with.

How great is the love of Christ? Large enough, powerful enough, forgiving enough,

wise enough, to get us where God wants us to go. Paul says (to the Romans) *"nothing... in this world or the next... can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* – nothing; not life or death, not suffering or hardship, not sin or folly, not the powers of evil seen or unseen; nothing! God's love in Christ is large enough, powerful enough, persistent enough, that we will never be outside it or beyond it. Whether we live "almost in heaven" or "on the edge of hell," Christ's love surrounds us.

Let me add just two things about this metaphor. Don't push it too far, and mistake it to mean that the perfect God-favored life is "in the middle" – middle aged, middle class, in the middle of God's will, neither overly-successful or overly-crushed. No, the "center" is Christ himself. Knowing his love means knowing him, and you can meet him anywhere, at any age, at any level of life, in joy or in sorrow, in the crowd or when you're alone. This metaphor is not about the Greek ideal of "the Golden Mean," where human flourishing required a life free from excess in any direction. The biblical metaphor is about discovering that no matter how old or young, how good or bad, how far out in any direction, how close to heaven or hell, the grace of God can still shine on you, the Spirit can still live in you, Christ and his love can still be present with you.

Secondly, do not forget that implicit in Paul's praise for the great love of God in Christ is that *the people of God should show this kind of love to one another*, and to the world that still needs reconciliation. He will develop this much more in the second half of his letter/sermon. But for all of us since, it means that our love should be as long and wide and deep and high as Christ's love for us. We ought to love the young, the middle, and the old, and not think God has favorites. We ought to love the flourishing and the downtrodden, and not think we or God

should prefer one over the other. We ought to be as wide in our love as he is, and not exclude people who seem to walk "far off the path."

So like Paul, let us pray for one another as "people of God," and pray also for all those we know (and in some cases, love) who are *not* at this point overtly "people of God" (though God alone knows their hearts). Let us pray that through his power, God will make his Spirit dwell in their inner beings, and that Jesus Christ may dwell in their hearts by faith, and that they may have power *"to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge."*

In case you think that's impossible for people you know, remember: *"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, to him be glory..."*

Let us pray...