

“So Big!”

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Based upon Psalm 139:1-18; Ephesians 3:14-21

When my son was a toddler, one of my favorite books to read to him, and one of his favorites to hear, was a picture book called I Love Your More by Laura Duksta.¹ The book begins with a little boy asking his mother how much she loved him. To answer his question, the mother tries to describe her love in terms of the things that the boy can see around him. “I love you higher than the highest bird ever flew... I love you longer than the longest path ever wound... I love you deeper than the deepest fish ever swam.” The book is filled with colorful illustrations by Karen Keesler, which capture each metaphor delightfully. But what really makes the book fun to read is that it goes in two directions; once you get to the middle, you turn the book over and begin reading it from the back to the front. From the reverse direction, the mother asks her son how much he loves her. The boy is ready with measurements of his own, like “further than the furthest frog ever leaped, bigger than the biggest bubble ever blown, taller than the tallest giraffe ever grown.” At the point in the middle where the two stories meet, one character gives the other a hug and then says, “You know what? I love you more! I love you more than anything in the whole wide world, more than anything in the whole wide world, more than anything in the whole wide world!” It’s a charming book, and one which conveys well both the joys and the challenges of trying to quantify something as unquantifiable as love.

I was reminded of that book when I read today’s lesson from *Ephesians* because we see much the same kind of thing going on in the prayer that Paul, or more likely one of his disciples writing in his name, offered. “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” Since the author, whom I will call Paul for convenience’s sake, leaves out the noun to which all those wonderful measuring adjectives refer, Christians throughout the ages have had to guess exactly what he meant. The consensus seems to be that Paul was referring either to God’s love, power, or purpose in Christ, or to some combination of all three. Paul prayed that his Gentile audience would truly understand the fullness of God in their hearts through Christ, even though knowing the fullness of God in their heads was impossible.

I think that this is the prayer of most Christians, if not always generously that others will understand the fullness of God themselves, then at least that we will ourselves. We come to church because we want to comprehend the vastness of God’s power, the depths of God’s love, and the breadth of God’s plan for humankind, and feel Christ dwelling in our hearts. The Gentiles did too in Paul’s day. They came to the churches that Paul had set up seeking to know and understand Christ intimately. But when they got there they were challenged by more than the fact that they did not know the Scriptures about Yahweh as well as the Jewish Christians in their midst. They were also challenged by some of those Jewish Christians themselves, who were not yet fully comfortable with the idea that God loved the Gentiles as much as them, and wanted them to be fully included in the Church. As a result, they didn’t feel God’s love in the

¹ Duksta, Laura, Keesler, Karen, I Love You More (Naperville: Sourcebooks Jabberwocky, 2009).

community of faith. They didn't feel that they had been reconciled with the Jews through Christ. Paul knew this, which is why he prayed that the Gentiles would come to experience the fullness of God's love in Christ. It is also why he made the main theme of *Ephesians* how God had planned from the beginning of time to bring everyone together into one big family through Christ. God's love was so big that God intended to save and reconcile the entire world.

If I had to summarize the main point of the *Letter to the Ephesians* for children, it would be something like "How big is God's love? Sooooooo big!" But you know how the "so big" game that parents and children love to play together is ultimately limited by the reach of the person's arms? Paul's second point, after affirming the wonderful inclusive love of God, is that our understanding of that love is equally limited, not by the finite reach of our arms, but by the finite reach of our minds. So when he used those terms of measurement—height, length, breadth, and depth—he was trying to convey both that we can't know the full scope of God's love, power, and wisdom because they are so vast, and that we must be wary of thinking that and behaving as if we do know these things. When that happens, inevitably we end up creating a God who is too small, and failing to model the love of Christ we are called to share.

Think about those measurements again with me, and then think about how people of faith typically apply them to God. For example, what is the "height" of God's love? I think if you asked most Christians they would say "God loves us as high as the highest heaven" because for some reasons people of faith have always thought of heaven as "up," as opposed to in another dimension. "Let's build a tower up to heavens," the people of Babel thought, "so we can make a name for ourselves." "Tell me what I must do to attain eternal life?" the rich man asked Jesus millennia later. Whether we measure the height in steps on a heavenly stairway or rungs on Jacob's ladder, the goal for most Christians is to get up to where God is and dwell in Paradise.

That goal still applies to the measurement of length, but in a slightly different way. We don't typically think about the length of God's arms, but believers do think fairly obsessively about the length of time God will take to accomplish God's purpose. I doubt a century has gone by since the invention of time without a single human being thinking he or she knew when the end of time would come, and in many centuries those people have been so persuasive, so sure they could calculate God's timing that they have convinced others to sell all their belongings, abandon their families, even take their own lives. We want to know how much time we have left because we want God's Kingdom to come on earth. We want the end to suffering, pain, and sadness. So if we can't get to Paradise by building a tower, then feeling like we are getting closer by marking the time is the next best thing.

Yet once we think we feel we know that length, the looming deadline raises the question of who will be saved when the time has come. That is a question of breadth and depth. How big is God's love really? Is it wide enough to include non-Christians? Is it deep enough to include really sinful people? If you ask many Christians, the answer to both questions is "No. God's love includes only those who profess faith in Christ, or who live a certain way, or who hold certain political beliefs." Basically, God's forgiveness extends only so far, many Christians argue.

For years in my last church I used to take questions from Confirmands on anything they wanted to discuss about God, and every year, someone would turn in a version of the question, “Which sins are unforgivable?” either because they could not tolerate a God who forgave and loved people they considered evil and immoral, or more often, because they feared in their hearts that if God really knew them, knew their thoughts and flaws, then God would not forgive them or love them anymore. For some reason, when heaven is the subject, the sky’s the limit in terms of God’s love, but when the breadth and depth of that love are the subject, there just seems to be something in the human heart which feels more comfortable measuring in millimeters than miles.

But the good news that Paul proclaimed is that God is not bound by our limited understanding and imagination. God is bigger than both, and in Christ, has given us very different measurements, not just for breadth and depth, but for height and length of God’s love as well. For example, Christ teaches us that height is not the most telling measurement of God’s love. While we were looking up to heaven, he came down to be with us. Although he started out higher than angels, he emptied himself, *Philippians* proclaims, so that he could walk by our sides and convey God’s love. (Phil. 2:6-11). He didn’t put himself above us; he joined us at our level. That’s a true testament to God’s love. Then Jesus went one step further still. According to the Apostles’ Creed, after he was crucified, he descended to the dead, even into hell. Whether you take that statement metaphorically or literally, the point is that the risen Christ carried the saving love of God everywhere so that no one would be without it. Christ brought God and Paradise to us, so that we wouldn’t have to build a tower or climb a ladder to experience divine love. He demonstrated that God loves us not just to the highest heaven, but as the Psalmist affirmed, also as low as Sheol. God’s saving grace is never out of reach.

Christ teaches us to measure God’s time differently too. He was with God in the beginning and will be with us in the end. But more importantly, he is with us in the middle too. That is why John said that Christ came to give us eternal life, and then defined eternal life as knowing God in Christ in this life. That is why the early Christians decorated their churches with pictures of Paradise on earth, more than with pictures of the cross or heaven. They believed that Christ had opened the door to our experiencing the eternal now, and Paradise now. We don’t have to wait for the end, nor should we worry about it. The good news of the Gospel is that the eternal and the kingdom are accessible on earth. Although the length of God’s power is forever, the time for God’s saving grace is now.

This is good news indeed. But if we hope to be able to step into the eternal now to experience God’s kingdom on earth, we seriously have to expand how we measure breadth and depth, because if there is one thing that Christ made abundantly clear, it is that the breadth of God’s love is from one end of the cosmos to the other and the depth is all the way into the bottom mucky crevices of our sinful hearts. God’s loves everyone, Jews and Gentiles, male and female, slave and free, of all colors and nations and backgrounds. God’s plan for salvation includes people we hate and those we love, people who scare us and inspire us. There’s nothing we can do or say, nothing we can fail to do or say that changes that. As the psalmist affirmed, God knows our inward beings, knows the worst and the best of us, and loves us anyway. This makes no sense to us given what we know of ourselves and others; it doesn’t even seem just at times. But whether our minds understand it or not, our hearts need to understand that it is

because of the unmeasurable, incomprehensible breadth and depth of God's love in Christ that we all are saved.

Our hearts need to feel this and believe this not just so that we can know God more intimately ourselves, but also because human beings will not be fully reconciled one with another until we all recognize this. We will not have Paradise on earth as long as we believe God loves some but rejects others. Paul knew this, which is why he prayed that by God's grace we would be strengthened by the Spirit in our inner being to know the fullness of God's love in Christ. Actually, the Greek says, may "the inner man in our hearts be strengthened," which some scholars like Eugene Peterson take to mean not just our inner psychological beings, the minds of our hearts, but truly Christ in us as well.² He is our "inner man" through faith. Paul wanted his readers to allow Christ to take the driver's seat in their hearts, so that when someone very different from ourselves asks us either in words, or simply by showing up in church, "How much does God love me?", our immediate response through our words and our actions will be "God loves you more than anything in the whole wide world, more than anything in the whole wide world, more than anything in the whole wide world."

This is not an easy thing to do when you feel in your heart that the person shouldn't belong, and isn't deserving of so much love. But it gets easier if instead of focusing on who God should love and how much, you start by flipping the book of your faith over, and spending some time thinking about how much you love God in light of all that we do know of God through Jesus Christ. Think of God as your parent. Think of all that God has done for you in Christ. Like the child in the children's book, think about whether you would be able to say to God honestly, "I love you higher than the highest swing every swung, sweeter than the sweetest song ever sung, or longer than the longest lollipop ever lasted." That's a start. Then when you can do that, ask yourself if you would be able, less poetically but more meaningfully, to answer "I love you higher than I value my own needs, longer than my ability to wait patiently, broader than my political party's platform, or my taste in friends, and deeper than my most hidden fears and pain?" (You see, it gets harder when you take away the cute illustrations.)

If and when we can affirm the height and length and breadth and depth of our love for God in this way, as a child who adores his or her parent more than anyone else in the whole wide world, then we discover two amazing truths. First, God will always respond to our love by embracing us and whispering, "I love you more!", and second, that those words have the power to change our hearts. The more you hear them and believe them, the more they start sounding less like a scary proclamation that God's love is bigger than our ability to control, and more like a comforting and inspiring affirmation. Then, as Paul told his readers, when Christ calls upon us to embody the fullness of God's love for others, we will find that we are able to do far more for God than we ever imagined we could do. Thanks be to God! Amen.

² Peterson, Eugene H., Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2010), 160-162 (citing the work of Markus Barth).