

2/13/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Good morning and welcome to Alexanderwohl, whether you are here in the sanctuary or joining on Zoom. This whole month we are focused on the theme of Love, and today in a dedicated way to receiving God's love. If nothing else, I hope we receive from this time confidence that we are connected in the love of Christ.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

People: Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Leader: Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

North: neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,

South: neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,

People: neither height nor depth,

Leader: nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us

All: from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

INVOCATION

God,

We gather as the body of Christ in your love.

We gather as imperfect human beings, with worries, regrets, wrongs, questions, judgmentalism, and fears.

But together we are the body of Christ, as Christ dwells in our hearts, when are rooted and grounded in his love.

May we grasp your love and be transformed by your love.

May this time of worship be another step on that lifelong journey. Amen

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

O God, we begin our prayer this morning with confession – we confess that it's difficult for us to understand and embrace the love you have for us. We read and hear the stories in the bible that tell us over and over again about your goodness, your redemption and your love for all that you have created. And yet, as we listen to the news and look around at our world, it's hard for us to imagine that nothing can separate us from your love. We confess that sometimes we feel small and powerless and uncertain.

As we have gathered in Sunday school and now, here to worship you, strengthen us, God, remind us, help us to encourage and remind each other that you are love and we are your people. As we receive the message, from the songs we sing and hear, from the words that Caleb and others share, from the offerings given and the fellowship we have as we greet and visit with one another, let us receive and give, a measure of your love for us.

Creator God, hear our prayers. We give you thanks for Leona's long-awaited release from hospital care and her arrival at Bethesda. Continue to be with her and with Norman as they make yet more adjustments in their lives. Be with Leona as she regains her strength.

We pray for Braxton Church as he will undergo surgery tomorrow afternoon in Boston. Be with his doctors and other caretakers, especially Amanda as she advocates and watches over him. Be with Braxton and give him trust and a calm spirit.

We pray for Lois Janzen as she prepares to have a pacemaker on Wednesday. Be with her doctor also, God, and the nurses and others who will care for her. Give her your peace that passes understanding as well, God.

We pray for those who have medical tests, appointments and other procedures coming up that may give angst and uncertainty. Send your Spirit of calm and trust into each heart. We pray for those who may be struggling with mental health – depression, anxiety, other issues that make it difficult to live life in the fullness of your joy. Again, we ask for your Spirit to work with medicine and other tools to bring health.

O God, we pray that your Spirit of Holiness would guide us all as we seek to heal brokenness. Give us eyes to see as you see the world, give us ears to hear as you hear your children crying. Give us willing spirits to be your hands and feet, serving with your love, listening carefully to people's experiences and longings. Give us hearts that are wide open to love your creation in all of its diversity and beauty. As St. Francis of Assisi prayed, make us channels of your peace, your hope, and your love in this world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

SERMON – PASTOR CALEB YODER

KNOWING THE LOVE OF CHRIST THAT SURPASSES KNOWLEDGE

Ephesians 3:14-19

Think of a place where you have seen a great expanse. An experience where you felt awe, where you felt privileged simply to be able to witness the view.

Maybe it was after hiking up a mountain and being able to see for many miles. Maybe it was the wide rolling plains of the flint hills and the big sky. Maybe it is looking up at the stars, especially on a clear night in the country, when you can see the band of the Milky Way. When looking at the stars, we are taking in light from objects unfathomable distances away. Gazing at the stars is often a spiritual experience for me.

[My pictures: taken after a mountain hike during the youth trip to Colorado back in 2017, as well as mountain views from Ecuador.]

When we taken in such views, all we know is that trying to measure "breadth, length, height, or depth" would get you a very large number, and numbers wouldn't even begin to describe the wonder. This is how Ephesians describes God's greatness and love. It should give us a sense of wonder.

Actually, verse 18 in a literal translation simply says “comprehend ... what is the breadth and length and height and depth,” without saying *of what*. It could be any of God’s qualities, but the love of Christ is explicitly mentioned in the next line, so that’s how I’ll read it.

WHY GOD’S LOVE?

Why talk about God’s love? We do this a lot anyway, and someone could think that’s just a feel-good message. Doesn’t the Bible also talk plenty about God’s anger and wrath? It’s true that there are biblical passages difficult to reconcile with the idea of a loving God.

But even God’s anger can be understood as part of God’s love – a God who is not indifferent but is invested enough in humanity to be upset by what we do to each other.

God’s love is threaded through the entire biblical story. God constantly worked redemptively through people, even when the people were unfaithful. God’s love was further revealed in Jesus’ ministry and faithfulness all the way to the cross. God’s love is the power of resurrection, which is the source of our continued faith and hope.

We rarely simply try to grasp God’s love or just receive God’s love. If you don’t get anything else from today, all that’s really important is this: receive the gift. Don’t refuse it. Open it. There’s no particular homework assignment to do. Just receive the gift.

EPHESIANS 3

Right in the middle of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is this beautiful prayer with plenty of flowery language. Verses 18-19 were theme verses for Beth and I’s wedding. I also had these verses engraved in a wood plaque by a friend who does specialized woodworking.

The prayer magnifies God as the source of every lineage of beings in the universe. Paul’s first petition is for God to give us the strength as Christ lives within our inner life. Interesting that this is a matter of “strength” and “power.”

We also have the double image of being “rooted” and “grounded” in love. “Rooted” is an idea from nature – a tree is strong because of its root system anchoring it and drawing nutrients from the soil. And “grounded” or “established” comes from the realm of construction, being built on a solid foundation.

The second main petition is for us to somehow grasp the magnitude of God’s love. It’s grasping the same way you might be chasing after a target, trying to catch it but never quite getting there.

How can we know the love of Christ when the love of Christ is something “beyond knowledge”? There’s some kind of irony or paradox here, and the prayer artfully expresses that paradox.

We’ll never fully comprehend, but to just get a little closer... And it’s not something you “know” like a multiplication table. It’s a deeper knowledge in with your whole self – like we talked about last week.

“So that we can be filled to the max with the fullness of God!” – that’s how I’d put it, but what that even means we will forever be discovering.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE LOVED?

In order to love, we need to know what it is to be loved.

The late archbishop Desmond Tutu said that each of us is “of immense worth, of infinite value because God loved us.”¹

In a very ordinary way, this is true of anything. Gold has always been valuable because people value it. Each person has immense value simply because God loves that person in their uniqueness, apart from anything they can do to somehow merit it or try to be better than someone else.

It really is as simple as that.

That’s not saying everything we do is good. Sin is a reality. We fall short. We harm one another and grieve God. God loves us in spite of that.

Sometimes we wrestle with what it means to be authentically ourselves, when we are all incomplete, when we all have a not-so-good side, and most of us would like to change something about ourselves.

I like the idea that the true you, the most authentic you, is the person God intended you to be, and we are all on a journey of becoming people that – in the language of Ephesians – have Christ dwelling in our hearts.

God loves us for who we are and who we are becoming. God is not done with us, and does not give up on us.

The same is true of the church, in spite of whatever we know is not of God in the broader church or even our congregation. We don’t always see things eye to eye, but God does not give up on us.

LOVING ONESELF

I originally considered making the theme of this Sunday about “loving ourselves.”

To “love your neighbor as yourself,” you have to love yourself. It’s assumed, though I haven’t seen verses in scripture that expound on it. The idea of “loving yourself” can be easily misunderstood, turned into something narcissistic or selfish.

As I reflected, it seemed to me that the heart of “loving yourself” in a healthy way is simply to fully receive God’s love, and the love of others in your life without putting up a wall or defenses.

Then you are in an economy without scarcity. As you have freely received, so you can freely give.

¹ Desmond M. Tutu, “My Credo,” in *Living Philosophies: The Reflections of Some Eminent Men and Women of Our Time*, ed. Clifton Fadiman (New York: Doubleday, 1990)

Some people are tragically wounded by physical or emotional abuse. Such wounds run deep.

I fortunately have not experienced emotional abuse. If I have anything that comes close, it's the words I've said to myself. Shaming messages for not managing to meet my own internalized standard of who I expected myself to be.

Even the affirmation and praise I received from people in my life for my unique gifts I could easily convert into a high and unattainable bar for myself.

One of my professors used to say she had a rule of not saying anything to herself that she wouldn't say to her sister. She cared about her sister. That doesn't mean they could only be words of affirmation. Sometimes we need to be corrected, but correction must be motivated by love, stated in a way the other can hear it, and rest on the capital of trust in the relationship.

We can't *reflexively* love others if we are not loving and patient and showing grace toward ourselves. We might be able to be kind, only because we make ourselves to be kind. I believe it is possible for anyone to be kind and show love sometimes to some extent, even if they are deeply wounded and unable to accept love for yourself.

But love won't be reflexive. It won't flow. You have to be "on the clock" so the speak, forcing yourself to do it.

It's like the difference between speaking a language non-fluently, having to pause to think about each word one-at-a-time and think about the grammar and how to string the words together, versus speaking fluently where the words and grammar are second-nature.

It's like being accomplished on the piano and you (I imagine) think in chords or progressions, rather than having to think about the individual notes.

Love takes effort and practice. It's only with lots of effort, practice, and listening that we even know what will feel loving to the other person.

But it will require even more effort if we don't love ourselves, and if we have our fortress walls that refuse to let in the love of God.

GRACE

Though the prayer in Ephesians doesn't contain the word "grace," "grace" shows up a fair bit elsewhere in Ephesians. Chapter 2:4-5 says, "because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by *grace* you have been saved." And in 2:8: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."

Grace is the reset that allows us to live differently.

LOVE AS BEING SEEN

In the words of Nadia Bolz Weber: "I have only ever been loved into holiness, never shamed into it."² She describes being loved as someone seeing the *you that is worthy of love*.

Grace isn't letting someone or yourself off the hook. Grace is what we need to be transformed. Some of you may be familiar enough with the story of *Les Mis* to recall the scene when Jean Valjean receives unexpected grace from a bishop after Valjean is caught stealing his silverware. The bishop gives him valuable candlesticks as well, and tells him his life has been spared for God.

This act of grace allows Valjean to become a different person. Grace disarms us, helps us ease the defenses that get in the way of making real change.

We also have to be patient with ourselves, because changing ourselves is almost as slow and effortful as it is to change someone else.

HEALING WORK OF RECEIVING

We are left with doing the "work" of receiving God's love in our individual journeys which also will have implications for the life of our congregation. This "work" of receiving love may look a little different for each person.

It might be taking time to be still, to be silent, to read words of promise in scripture. It might be asking forgiveness for something that has been troubling your spirit for a long time. It might be re-reading a card someone who loves you sent to you in the past.

Maybe you need a good cry. I am not a crier, but I have had several times of letting loose the tears of my own wounds in the embrace of God's love. Those kinds of tears are healing, even if the effect is not immediate.

Maybe you need a warm, clear night to gaze at the stars. God loves you. Love others. Love yourself.

QUESTIONS

1. What experiences or practices have helped you become "rooted and established in love"?
2. What is the relationship between loving God and others and receiving love?
3. Is there such a thing as emphasizing God's love too much?

BENEDICTION

May God strengthen you in your inner being by the Spirit

May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith.

May you be rooted and grounded in love and have the power to grasp with the saints how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ

And may you be filled with all the fullness of God who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. Amen

² <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/a-painter-a-thief-mary-magdalen-and>