

Grasp the Love of God
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Ephesians 3:14-21
Epiphany 2 C

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When was the last time you felt truly, unconditionally loved? Maybe more to the point, have you ever felt that way? I'm not talking about just warm fuzzies here, I mean you felt safe and secure in the love of someone else. Never once doubting that they had your best interest in mind always. Never once fearing that anything you did or could do would change their opinion of you. Never feeling like if you didn't keep up a certain standard all of it would come crashing down around you.

It's hard to imagine, isn't it? After all, how can we ever feel that someone else loves us like that when we ourselves don't love others like that? We don't love unconditionally and we don't love without cause. Human love just works that way, because at the core we are selfish by nature. Our love is causal. It is based on what we receive first. Even the closest of human relationships can be shattered when pushed too far. Parents can turn on children and spouses on each other when circumstances get bad enough. We will only tolerate so much from another person before the love grows cold.

We like to think ourselves better than that, that we could endure anything from the other person and still view them the same way, but it's not the case. Consider this possibility. Consider the worst action you could imagine another human being carrying out, one that disgusts you beyond anything else. Now imagine you discovered the person you hold dearest in your life had done this. And don't just balk and say we're being ridiculous here. With the sinful nature, all human beings are capable of the worst of sin, every one of us. So your treasured person did this. Maybe even did it to you. Could you still feel the same about them?

If our feelings are changeable for anybody, no matter how outside the possibility, is it any wonder then that we have a hard time resting securely in the love of someone else? And is it then any surprise that we doubt the love of our God by nature just as much? After all our love for our God is just as fickle as our love for anyone else here on this earth, perhaps even moreso at times. We're happy to do what God asks, so long as it doesn't conflict with what we might want. We'll do what he wants, as long as there's no other choice we like better. Sure God can come first, unless there's the option of putting our job first. Or our family or friends. Or fishing. Or football. Or sleep. God wants me to come and listen to him and study his word? Sure I'll do that...unless I don't really want to. We make excuses, we invent reasons and we rationalize but every one of them is just designed to ease our conscience when we've chosen something else over our God. When it comes to worshipping the Lord and studying his word, God accepts only excuse as valid for not being there, and that's if God himself prevents you from physically being there. No for all the other times we have chosen the world over God, we've shown how fickle our love is.

And even when we do act, how often have we done so not out of love for the Lord? We do because "we're supposed to" or "because that's what we do". We do it because we want to keep God off our backs or keep the pastor from pestering us. Dragging ourselves to worship as an obligation is no better than not going at all. Choosing to do the right thing in our lives because we're afraid of the consequences rather than out of love for God's commands is no better than outright sinning. Even in our actions our love for God fails so often... is it any wonder that our hearts find it difficult to rest securely in him? Is it any wonder that we doubt his love and goodness for us, if that's what we're like and especially if that's how we act towards him?

And we do doubt it. This is plainly shown in the choices we make and the actions we take. When we chose to love the things or people of this world before our God, we're saying that we feel more secure in them than in the love of our Lord. It is doubt of his love that causes us to fear how our lives are going. It is doubt of his love that causes us to worry about the course of the entire world. It is doubt of his love that makes us angry or causes us to despair when pain and hurt and troubles visit us. We say, "How is this for my good, God?!" "Why would you allow this, God?!" and in doing so we call him a liar, we accuse him of not loving us like he promised.

I should hope it goes without saying that none of us want to live like this. Why would we willingly pursue this life of anger and fear and worry when we could have peace and security and comfort? But how do we fix it? How do we change this selfish, causal concept of love we have when it's fundamentally wrong?

St. Paul gives us the answer in our section of Ephesians today: <Read text: Ephesians 3:14-19>.

There are a number of significant points in these few verses that are easy to just roll over and not catch, so bear with me while we dig into some of them in an order that hopefully makes some logical sense. To start with, the question we asked was how do we change this selfish, causal concept of love we have when it's fundamentally wrong? The short answer to that question is; we don't. Look at what Paul says here; it all comes from God. We are powerless to change this about ourselves. He prays that God, out of his own riches, may strengthen you so that Christ can dwell fully in your heart through faith and that through this faith, rooted and established, you may have the power to grasp just how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is.

It short, understanding God's love for you must be *given* to you. And not just given, but given as a gift. Paul says he kneels before God the Father, praying that we might receive this gift from his riches. It's not something we earn or deserve in exchange for something else. It's simply given. This is, simply put, the gift of faith itself. It's the gift that learns of the love of Christ and all he has done for you. Coming to terms with the love that God has for you, accepting it as true, trusting it and demonstrating it ourselves all goes back to starting with Christ. God's love shows itself both at its fullest and its most incomprehensible through Jesus himself, and so that's where we look to start.

It is, after all, the season of Epiphany when Jesus is revealed to us and it is through Christ that God's love is revealed most fully. All of us here know the fullest example. That Jesus set aside his divine glory and power to live a human life, and to die in your place on the cross. The impact of this act of love comes from first understanding how we have treated our God. We first must recognize that not only do we give God no reason to love us, but we actively give him reasons to hate us. And yet despite that, we know for a fact what he did for us. Or maybe I should phrase that differently. God knows me. He knows me better than anyone else. He knows my shameful secrets, the things done and thought in the corners of my mind. He knows the times I've chosen to disobey him. When faced with the right thing or the thing I want and I said "I don't care," in my selfishness. With anyone else, I would be ashamed to even show my face near them again, I would know how they should feel about me.

I should have the same fear of facing God. He knows me...and yet he chose to die for me. He knows you...and yet he chose to die for you. For anyone else we would be afraid of how they feel about us, but with God we have the proof that this is not the case. We can see here that with full knowledge of what he was doing and whom he was doing it for, Christ went forward and died in your place. And yes, for you. He could've excluded you. He could've been selective about who was worth it. But he didn't. He knew you and he chose you to die for. That is the love that God has for you. It truly is unconditional. It truly is irrevocable. And it truly cares about you in every way at every step.

See, Jesus and his love is not just revealed to us in the grand strokes of his death. It's also revealed to us in the minutia of life. It's in a God who cared enough to prevent a couple from being embarrassed at their own wedding celebration from a lack of proper catering. Who provided something as frivolous as wine that the revels could continue. The love of God cares not just about your eternal salvation but about every step of your way to get to your heavenly home.

It is in these acts of love found throughout Scripture that we strive to grasp the love of God. That we strive to deepen our understanding of just how full his love for us is. The more our God is revealed to us through studying his word, the more we know him and his love for us. The blessing is not just in the knowledge, however. The more you know just how fully God loves you, the more you can trust that love no matter the circumstances and live a life at peace without anger or fear or worry or doubt. And the more that love fills you from within, the more you will reflect that love back to God himself and to the people in your life. Filled and fulfilled by the love of God, you can love the people of this world with a reckless abandon, a love that does not love because of what it receives in return, but because of what it has already received from its God.

Brothers and sisters, grasp the love of your God in his word. Learn of what he has done for you in every way, in every circumstance, that you may be filled with that love from within and the power of that love compel you to share his love with the world. Amen.