

The Extravagant Love of God

Part 1

Mark 11: 1-11; Ephesians 3:14-21

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In our scripture lesson this morning we listened to Paul's words to the Christians of Asia Minor, of which Ephesus was the capital. Although this was not a church that Paul had established it is a church in which he had worked for three years (54-57CE) and it is a community he knew and loved. The words written here, words written while Paul is imprisoned (6:21-22) are essentially a prayer for those fellow believers from whom he is separated by life circumstances and the challenges of the day. Paul was in an all too real "lockdown" situation without the existence of a pandemic. For him "social distancing" wasn't an option but a daily reality imposed on him.

This prayer of Paul for the Christians in Asia Minor seems to have particular relevance to us at present – not simply because we too are isolated from one another out of health and safety concerns in this season of the COVID-19 crisis but because today we are entering the week we call Holy through the portals of Palm Sunday and are focusing once more on our Lord's passion and death on our behalf.

The substance of Paul's prayer for his friends is what I would pray for fellow believers here at FPC Greensboro this Palm Sunday 2020.

- That we might be strengthened in our inner being through the power of God's Spirit.
 - That Christ might dwell in our hearts through faith as we are rooted and grounded in love;
 - That we might be filled with the fullness of God;
- And as I seek to emphasize this morning
- That we might know the love of Christ, the breadth and length and height and depth, even though such love surpasses human knowledge.

If we could ever get the world and its struggling masses to see and accept the depth of God's love for them, a love made flesh in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, then the life of this world and its inhabitants would be turned upside down. However, this is a difficult task at best. How can we get people to understand how loved they are? Of course, we can love people ourselves and try to reflect in our own actions the kind of unconditional and sacrificial love that we have received from God's hand, but we often fail, and our best attempts are frequently flawed. Too often our love is calculated, manipulative, and even self-serving. So then, how do we adequately tell people of the love of God in Christ for human speech itself inadequate? As the hymn writer put it: "What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest Friend, for this thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end?"

Of course, part of the problem for us is acknowledged by the apostle when he says that such love “surpasses human knowledge.” We might even add that it surpasses human experience as well. The love of Christ is above us and beyond us and makes all of our attempts at loving pale in comparison. God is so extravagant in his love for his wayward children and we are not quite sure what to make of it. To the contrary, we human beings are anything but extravagant. We are often prudent, cautious and reserved in speaking or in demonstrating our love. Even the word *extravagant* suggests something that is reckless, wasteful, excessive, overindulgent, and perhaps even ill-advised or inappropriate. So, it is very difficult for people like us to comprehend for even ourselves a love like God’s, a love that goes beyond what is regarded as acceptable or appropriate. Even more difficult is the task of enabling others to comprehend such incomparable love.

And yet, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel, the God who became Incarnate in Jesus Christ would have to be described as extravagant in his love for his children and his world. Just consider the biblical account of the lengths to which God has gone in an effort to demonstrate and prove his love for his children. This morning I would ask you for a few moments and just to imagine for a while that you are God. Of course, sometimes we try to be God but this morning I want you, for a limited time, only to imagine that you are God. Put yourself in God’s place.

Let us suppose, for example, that you had created a fine new world, abundant, beautiful, orderly, intricate, and majestic and you had peopled it with marvelous little creatures fashioned in your own image. You had placed within their hearts a longing to know you, the One who created them and anticipated their every need, and you had given to these little creatures guidelines for living, instructions for living, laws of right and wrong, and also the freedom and ability to do what you require.

Before long, however, you discover that these splendid little creatures are at other’s throats, selfishly hoarding or foolishly using the bounties of nature as the mood strikes them. Each one is scrambling to get on top of the other. They are jealous and resentful and stubborn. They resent being told what they can and cannot do, even if it is for their own welfare. They have even forgotten that they are creatures and are attempting to usurp the very place of God. Now I wonder what you would have done, had you been God. You may simply have lost patience and left them in their scrambling.

But alas, God loved his children, so he did more. He whispered into the hearts of the few of the more sensitive of the little beings and reminded them of the God who had made them and miraculously delivered them when they were enslaved and the purpose for which they had been created. A few actually listened but the majority of the creatures ignored or cursed these prophets, as they were called, and ignored their messages or told them to mind their own business. Some they even stoned to death in their anger and arrogance. Now I believe that I would have given up at that point, had I been God. After all, enough is enough! No, in this case enough is too much.

But incredibly, God loved them so much that he did more. In time he said to himself, "I will go down and live among them through my own Son, sharing their life with all of its trials and tribulations, with all of its hurts and pains and sorrows. I will share their difficulties and walk among them as one of them. I will even undergo their death. Surely, they will see and experience Me in my Son and then they will listen and will at long last be willing to become what I created them to be and begin to live in peace and joy and justice and in harmony with one another and nature. They will see what I mean by serving one another and loving me." So, as Paul remind us in his letter to the Philippians "God emptied himself" of his divine prerogatives and "took upon himself the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." And as a human he "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death --- even death on a cross."

So as incomprehensible as it may seem, God chose to come among his creatures in the form of a common human being. And this one was born as a helpless little baby to a Jewish maiden in an out of the way village in the backwash of the Roman Empire. He was born to a peasant girl, not to a princess. His bed was in a manger and not a palace. And thus no one would ever accuse God's Son of living successfully and victoriously because of any social, political or financial connections at his disposal.

And so, the little creatures listened for a while to this strange little God-like creature and they even loved him as they observed him helping and serving others. In him people were hearing and seeing the very God their ancestors had worshiped. And yet, they wanted him in time to be something more than a slave, maybe a great king or a powerful and fearless military leader who would drive the Romans out of their occupied homeland. Some of these were visibly upset when he challenged his popular customs and institutions and when he called into question both their religion and their lifestyle. So once again the little creatures grew ugly and mean in their disappointment. They bared their teeth and they murdered the God-like creature, the very Son of God who had been sent to them as an act of mercy.

Now surely if you or I had been God that would have been more than enough. We would have been prudent and cautious enough to realize that there is no sense in wasting your investment of love on stubborn, thankless little creatures who do not deserve it and who refuse steadfastly to change. To continue loving these arrogant and cruel little beings would be extravagant to the point of being absurd.

But amazingly, God did still love these creatures and so he did more. He said, "I will show them that my power is greater than all of the scheming's of evil men. I will show them that my love is greater than the cruelty of men. I will show myself alive to them after death and then not even death itself will terrify them. No longer will they refuse to see my love and power and they will realize that the way of the despised and crucified God-like creature, his loyalty, his love and his obedience will be my way for them as well, even though they may be rejected by the world. And so, God did more in his extravagant love. He raised Christ triumphant from the grave. But I wonder---would you or I have bothered if we were God?"

Extravagant indeed is the love of God, even ludicrous, until you stop to consider that we are the little creatures, and had God not been so extravagant, who of us would have any hope in this world. Paul was on target: such love is beyond our comprehension. What language can we

borrow to describe it? It is broader and longer and higher and deeper than anything we know. And it is able to accomplish in us and through us much more than we can ask or conceive.

Throughout sacred history people have wondered and questioned why the passion and death of Jesus was necessary for human salvation. Why must our redemption depend on the shedding of blood and the death of the innocent one? Was all of this necessary we asked? Why is the suffering and death of Christ so important? Why has it been so central to Christianity and why is an instrument of torture, the cross, a primary symbol of our faith? All of these questions relate to the theological doctrine of the atonement. How as God reconciling taken humanity in the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Theories abound and they would make for a lively discussion. There is ransom theory, the satisfaction theory, the substitutionary theory, the moral influence theory and others.

As I reflected on my answer to these questions, I concluded that nothing so communicates the depth of God's love for me personally, as well as God's love for all of you, as the realization of what God was willing to undergo in exchange for my salvation. I know me rather well. I was not worth the price paid. How could my Lord have done such an extravagant, such a costly, such an incomprehensible thing for the likes of me?

When I was about 15 years old, I attended a presbytery summer camp. The service down by the lake was led by outstanding young ministers from North Mississippi named Tom Are. (His son, Tom Are, Jr. is currently the pastor of what I think is the largest Presbyterian Church in the county.) Now I was already a Christian by then and as I made my way to the lakeside chapel, I was more interested in finding a seat beside a pretty teenage girl from Meridian, Mississippi named Rachel Davis than hearing Tom's message. But that night he quoted the lyrics from an Easter cantata called "The Crucifixion" by John Stanier. There is a bass oratorio in that piece which has Jesus hanging on the cross speaking to those below who look upon him. Based on a passage from Lamentations 1:12 he says something that moved by faith and gratitude to a new dimension:

From "The Crucifixion"

By John Stanier

*"Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?
Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow
which is done unto me,
Wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me in the day of His fierce anger.*

*From the throne of His Cross, the Kind of grief
Cries out to a world of unbelief:
Oh! men and women, afar and nigh,
It is nothing to you, all ye that pass by?*

*I laid My eternal power aside,
I came from the Home of the Glorified,
A babe, in a lowly cave to lie;*

*Is it nothing to you all ye that pass by?
I wept for the sorrows and pains of men,
I healed them, and helped them, and loved them; but then
They shouted against Me---Crucify! Crucify! Crucify!
Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?*

*Oh! men and women, your deeds of shame,
Your sins without reason or number or name;
I bear them all on this Cross on high;
Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?
Is it nothing to you that I bow my Head?
And nothing to you that My Blood is shed?
Oh perishing souls to you I cry,
Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?*

*Oh come unto Me---by the woes I have borne,
By the dreadful scourge and the crown of thorn,
By these, I implore you to hear My cry,
Is it nothing to you all ye that pass?*

*Oh come unto Me---this awful price,
Redemption's tremendous sacrifice---
Is paid for you---Oh, why will you die?
Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?*

Oh come unto Me."

Take away the cross, remove the passion and the sacrificial love of Christ, forget Holy Week and Good Friday and you are left with just another religion, not a transforming relationship! Christianity then becomes just another philosophy of life, a system of ethics like any other claiming our allegiance; and Jesus becomes just another moral teacher I can either admire or dismiss, but certainly not my personal Redeemer who has paid the price to be Lord of my life.

A novel of another century, written by George Meredith, is entitled *Beauchamp's Career*. It tells of the abbreviated life of one Nevil Beauchamp, a young, handsome, aristocratic, radical idealist, who spent his brief years in an attempt to correct many of the ancient abuses of society. But Beauchamp suddenly died when he dashed into a river to rescue a nameless and dirty child off the street who was drowning. The novelist described the climactic scene as follows:

"The mother of the rescued boy sobbed...and dragged the urchin to Lord Romfrey's feet on the riverbank. All the lights...were turned on the head of the abashed little creature. This is what we have in exchange for Beauchamp! It was not uttered but it was visible in the blank stare at one another of the two men who loved Beauchamp, after they had examined the insignificant bit of mudbank life remaining in the world in place of him."

A Beauchamp for an urchin! A somebody for a nobody What a waste, thought the friends of Beauchamp. What a reckless and ridiculous thing Beauchamp had done. What extravagant love!

But if the exchange of a Beauchamp for a nameless little boy was considered extravagant, what can we say of the exchange of Jesus Christ for you or for me? How excessive and extravagant is that? How unfathomable is the love that can make any sense or see any justice in this arrangement?

Do you suppose that the Lord God might just have thought that such unmitigated extravagance on the Lord's part might get through our thick skulls, might cause a stirring in these cold hearts of ours? If that ever happened, if people like you and me were ever to catch just a glimpse of the love of God, and if we began to respond to that love by loving as we have been loved, maybe the day would come when it would be seen that the death of Christ and the excessive love of God in Jesus was really no waste at all. For the little creatures would at long last begin worshiping and serving their Creator and loving and helping one another, and the One who came and died would see how his love did, after all, accomplish its purpose. It won over the self-centered and sinful little creatures that God had loved from the day of their creation.

Oscar Wilde rightly observed:

“Without extravagance there is no love.
Without love there is no understanding.”