

Text: Ephesians 3: 14-21

Title: Loved

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As near as I can figure children have no idea how much their parents love them.

I am sure there are some qualifiers. Most children have no idea how much most parents love them. There may be some children who get it. And, sadly, there are some parents who don't. But, for the most part ~ children don't know how much their parents love them.

Part of that is due to cognitive development. Grady John, dripping wet with the waters of baptism, doesn't have the ability to understand how much Jane and Joel love him.

As he gets older,

as his brain develops,

as his life unfolds,

as Jane and Joel log hour after hour, day after day, year after year, of caring, teaching, providing, wiping, and nurturing, Grady's understanding of their love will grow.

But, I don't know that it will ever match the love.

Love exceeds understanding.

Of course, life is complicated and confusing. I have seen young fathers in the delivery room who look like they just got hit by a truck. Stunned and not sure what to say or do, they awkwardly hold their new born baby blob, and quite frankly, they don't know what they feel. And, I've seen old mothers whose hearts are broken and angry by the struggles of their children and they don't know what to make of the conflicting emotions they feel deep in their own souls. Loving children can be complicated and confusing. But, I think in general: Love outpaces understanding. Love reaches past understanding.

I don't mean romantic love. I am not suggesting the whims of passion that toss aside reason because the heart wants what the heart wants. I don't mean, to quote the 17<sup>th</sup> century mathematician and philosopher, Pascal, "The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing." I mean that children simply can't comprehend how much their parents love them.

And. And, I would also suggest that love grows as children grow.

These fine young parents ~ bringing their beautiful babies for baptism every week ~ love their children, but they don't know yet how that love will enlarge as their children grow up. Older parents know it, and grandparents know it, because years of sacrifice, and joy, and heartbreak, and pride, and amazement, and sleepless nights... all of that seasons and enlarges love. One reason why children don't have any idea how much their parents love them is because that love grows as they grow, that love deepens as they develop.

I am not sure if it is helpful but my own children have suffered through countless times where I've tried to pass on some hard won wisdom. Usually I do this in the form of a carefully crafted letter ~ littered with alliteration. And, usually that letter includes some reminder that we love them beyond what they can imagine. And, usually that news is meant with a smile of polite patience.

But, I want them to know ~ beyond anything else ~ that they are loved.

I want them to know that they are loved ~ beyond what they can know or imagine. Maybe that is the prayer of every parent.

That is Paul's prayer for the Ephesians. With great aplomb he declares that his desire for them is that they might have the power of God, to grasp the love of God, so that they might be filled with the fullness of God. And, in that prayer there is a paradoxical hook. He prays that they might know a love that is beyond knowing. In Paul's words:

*I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge...*

The language has the sense of seizing something, of getting it in your grasp. But, love can't be contained. Paul's prayer is that they might know a love, not that is unknowable, but that is beyond their capacity to know fully.

In 1930 Albert Einstein wrote an essay entitled, "What I Believe." In trying to get at his foundational convictions he wrote about standing before mystery. In his words:

*The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle.*

Dear friends, the testimony of scripture is that God's love is bigger than our capacity to understand. It can't be contained in scripture, it can't be delineated by reason, and it can't be managed by religion. But, it is a mystery that prods and unsettles and sparks wonder and stokes amazement. It makes wrestlers wrestle and singers sing.

And, this morning we join Paul in this tender and bold prayer. Our baptismal prayer for Grady John, our prayer for all our children, is that they might know a love so overwhelming that the best they can muster in response is art, or science, or silence, or awe. We want them to know that they are loved by God beyond any love that they can ever imagine.

I don't mean the limitation of Jesus as personal savior, and I don't mean the squandering of God's love into a personal resource for our benefit and blessing. Nor, do I mean a love that is so tame and comfortable that it never disrupts and dislodges. Rather, I mean a love that if we stretched finite facilities as far as they stretch ~ even at their most extended ~ we would still find our grasp too short.

Two weeks ago the image that we highlighted in Paul's opening lines to the Ephesians was that God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world..." That is to say that all that is under, supporting, unshakable, essential, and foundational is God's will in Christ.

Well, Paul echoes that line in this prayer. He starts with us "rooted and established in love...."

So, from the very foundation you are loved (two weeks ago) that you may built into a "holy temple.... a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (last week). That you might reach toward a love that is beyond your reach.

From foundation to ceiling.

From top to bottom.

Rooted and reaching in love.

Now...

We might try to package it with tradition.

We might try to limit it with legalism.

We might make it more manageable with institutions and structures.

We might scrunch it into a particular religious heritage.

We might wedge it into creeds, confessions, and catechisms.

We might even squelch it with sermons.

But, we won't be able to hold it all, or explain it all, or understand it all. For God's love reaches from the foundation beyond furthest galaxy that is light years away. And, that love is both comforting foundation and endless mystery.

There is one nagging practical question: How will the Ephesians know this love? How will our children know this love?

I don't have any easy answers.

I know that part of it is by being together to worship, wonder, wrestle, pray, sing, and offer thanksgiving. I know that while they are just symbols (baptism and communion) and it is just language (preaching, liturgy, etc), these symbols and this language are part of what God uses to communicate. Our efforts will be flawed, but it is what we know.

I also know that we experience God's love in community. We need, and our kids need, to have their lives woven together with others who are fumbling about after God. There is something to be said about placing our children in the diverse web of a community

that isn't afraid of question nor confession,

that is willing to embrace paradox,

that is undeterred to serve others,

that lives in the mystery of a love that doesn't fit containers.

And, finally, I know that it has something to do with loving our kids as best we can at every turn of the road. And, sometimes the best we can do is join with Paul in prayer. For, love is not an object that can be grasped,  
or a goal to be achieved,  
or a mystery to be captured,  
but love can only find expression in the experience of living,  
and so we pray that it will capture us and our children.

You know there is a debate among biblical scholars about what Paul means by the height, width, depth, and breadth of God's love.

Some think it references the dimensions of the cross,  
some the parameters of the holy city,  
some think of it as a way of framing God's law.

But, what if it echoes the theme that no matter how far we might run, or go or stretch, or reach, or understand..... God is there?

In the words of David's prayer:

*Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.*

Psalm 139: 7-10

Dear child of God,

no matter where you,  
no matter who you are,  
no matter what your journey...

You are chosen by God in Christ ~ for no reason other than God's love.

You are reconciled to God by Christ ~ for no reason other than God's love.

You are loved beyond what you can know ~ for no reason other than God's love.

You are chosen, reconciled, and loved.

May you and those whom you love be enveloped in that love that is beyond our knowing.  
Amen.