

# Wide, Long, High, and Deep

July 25, 2021

## Introduction

So, how many of you have said “Thank you for loving me DESPITE my flaws or imperfections” or some version of love despite? Have you ever said that kind of unthinkingly. Or, maybe you’ve even said to a loved one, “I love you IN SPITE of your weaknesses?”

On the surface, love despite flaws, imperfections, and weaknesses can sound good, perhaps even godly. Yet, it was on the app, TikTok, that I was reminded – leave it to TikTok to remind me – of how harmful this idea actually can be.

The TikTok-er I watched, Scottie Cyr, was a pastor for 10 years. He suffered a major mental breakdown and had to take a medical stress leave from his position. (I learned all this from TikTok.)

So, after a lot of healing and deconstruction, he realized that being taught, “I am loved IN SPITE of who I am and what I have done conditioned him to believe that any bit of love he has received from anybody is a favor that he didn’t and doesn’t deserve from them. He, and I, think that there are a lot of us that probably need to unlearn this. Scottie ends his video by emphatically stating: “Our existence is all that we need to be worthy of love.”

Another extremely common saying, is “Hate the sin, love the sinner.” Who has heard that? So, on social media, Cristina Miller decides to flip this saying around. She writes: “Turns out my friends who love to tell me they ‘hate the sin, love the sinner’ in regards to my sexuality feel very attacked when she tells them I ‘hate the belief, love the believer.’” She goes on to say: It’s “almost as if that phrase is just an underhanded way to tell someone that you don’t actually love them.”

So, what does God have to say about love, particularly in our Psalm and passage from Ephesians today? If God is love, how can we live more wholehearted lives?

Last week, Pastor Bridget referenced sociologist and storyteller Brené Brown when she encouraged us to “Go Out and Play.” In addition to play, Brené Brown talks about nine other “guideposts” that represent the practices of wholehearted living. Each of these guideposts involves letting go of harmful or destructive habits and instead cultivating healthy and loving habits.

The New International Version of Ephesians 3:17-18 is “And I pray that you being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.” So, today, I would like to weave together how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, along with Brené Brown’s guideposts. Are you ready for the journey with me?

### **God's Love is Wide.**

One of my favorite hymns since being at Union is "There is a Wideness in God's Mercy." The first guidepost that goes along with the wideness of God's love and mercy is letting go of anxiety as a lifestyle; instead, cultivating calm and stillness.

Related to our Psalm for today, Paul O. Myhre, from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology writes, "Psalm interpretation is not linear. Engaging the Psalms is an invitation to exercise contemplation to let the water carry us. Stop trying to figure things out so clearly or precisely. Let the textual waters envelope and inspire."

Another guidepost that can help us to grasp the love of Christ is letting go of being "cool" and "always in control," by cultivating laughter, song, and dance instead. Psalms and poetry point to a reality that's beyond human grasp or complete definition. God is both known and unknowable. In Psalm 145, praise, blessing, and exaltation come like laughter, song, and dance. Paul O. Myhre also writes, "Human response to the activity of God breaks open like a flower to the effects of sun and water. It cannot be stopped. It must be spoken."

The final guidepost to help us grasp Christ's wide love is letting go of the need for certainty by cultivating intuition and trusting faith. Prior to our Ephesians passage for today, at the beginning of Ephesians 3 Paul writes: "Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus through the Gospel." God is Mother and Father to all of humanity, inclusive of all people, nations, genders, ethnicities, and inclusive of all of our existence.

So now you can kind of see the reason why I had you raise your hands every time during the Psalm today when the words ALL or EVERY were read. Carolyn Brown has a "Worshiping With Children" blog, and her rationale behind raising our hands is that God does not love any people, nation, gender, ethnicity more or less than any other. And then Paul, overwhelmed by the mystery of reconciliation, begins Ephesians 3 – our passage today – with, "For this reason, I bow my knees." Reconciliation – true reconciliation – prompts humility and reverence to God. The ability to unite all nations, cultures, ethnicities, genders – isn't that what we all want? Instead of trying to figure out reconciliation on our own, are we calling upon God and our faith?

### **God's Love is Long.**

If God loves us completely, why do we often find it so difficult to love ourselves and treat ourselves well? A guidepost that can help us better love ourselves as God loves us is letting go of perfectionism by cultivating self-compassion. Instead of loving ourselves despite our flaws, weaknesses, and imperfections, what if there is nothing that can change God's love for us or our love for ourselves?

Years ago, Philip Yancey, in his book, What's So Amazing About Grace? wrote, "Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more... And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less... Grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love."

I often think about this as a parent. No matter what Valentina does – good or bad – there is nothing she can do that can make me love her more or less.

Another guidepost to help us experience the length of Christ's love is letting go of numbing and powerlessness by cultivating a resilient spirit. In Psalm 145, we are reminded that the Lord satisfies the desire of every living thing. Yet, while we may need food and money to live, our souls are not fed by food, or money, or power, or ego. Instead, our souls are fed through connection: prayer, worship, community.

### **God's Love is High.**

Our first experiences of both human love and divine love are often at home. While some of our homes may have been more or less loving than others, many of our ideas about God's love come from our relationships with our family, for better or worse.

How can we better experience the height of God's love? We can let go of what people think by cultivating authenticity. Sally Brown, of Princeton Seminary, points out that in the Ephesians passage for today, we are overhearing prayer. She asks the question, "How do you preach on an overheard prayer? Should I?" She writes that as a child she overheard her parents praying for her and her older brother and that by overhearing them praying for them, she learned that they were a sacred trust, that they were worth praying for. These prayers let her know that her parents recognized their limits as parents. That there was so much that her parents could not do for them, so much from which they couldn't shield their kids. In the meantime, it also told Sally what her parents believed about God, that they could entrust their children to hands stronger than their own, to a love wiser than their own.

Another guidepost to help us experience the height of God's love is letting go of scarcity and fear of the dark by cultivating gratitude and joy. Carolyn Brown again, on her *Worshipping With Children Blog*, also had an idea for cultivating gratitude and joy, kind of like Joann's *Children's Moments*. At mealtimes or enjoying a special treat together with family, she suggests identifying all the people involved in getting the food or the treat to you. Who were all the workers and all who processed the ingredients, the store workers, everyone involved? And trace it all the way back to God. Thank God for all these people and their work. Thank God for the raw materials.

The final guidepost to help us grasp the height of God's love is letting go of comparison by cultivating creativity. As Paul O. Myhre discussed in the interpretation of Psalm 145, he reminds us that human words will always fail to define God fully. Description fails to provide a complete picture, yet poetry and song and dance give us glimpses and snippets of the divine.

What creative outlets provide you with glimpses and snippets of the divine? Song, dance, art, laughter? What are you doing to cultivate creativity in your life? When we are creative, we generally don't compare, as there are plenty of songs, dances, and artworks that move and touch us. Each is beautiful and special in its own unique way.

## **God's Love is Deep.**

When we experience how God loves us deeply and completely, we have an abundance to share with others. This is where the last two of Brené Brown's guideposts can be woven in.

First, God's deep love can help us let go of self-doubt and the idea of what we're "supposed to" be doing in order to cultivate meaningful work. Psalm 145 is the last word of King David in the Psalter. I'm not necessarily saying that King David was the actual historical author of Psalm 145, but he is representative of the people and he voices their needs. Yet, in Psalm 145, it is evident that God as heavenly king is faithful in a way that no king of Israel ever was. God's kingdom endures forever, in contrast to the Davidic monarchy that could not last. David even realizes this.

So, what can we learn about meaningful work from Psalm 145? In the Ancient Near East, the role of king was to provide a safe place of habitation for humanity. This included dwelling places, farm land and harvests, drinking water. Still, in our 21st century world, many people do not have the basic elements of safe habitation. Whether this is a result of poverty, violence, disease, or neglect. We have an opportunity, in God's name, to be the hands and feet and heart of God and do this meaningful work. As Psalm 145 says, we can: uphold all who are falling, raise up all who are bent down, give food, and hear and respond to cries for help.

The final guidepost about the depth of God's love and its relation to our work in this world is letting go of exhaustion as a status symbol and productivity as self-worth, and instead, cultivating play and rest. If you didn't listen to Bridget's sermon from last Sunday yet, I would highly encourage you to find it on Facebook or Union's webpage. Our self-worth, especially in God's economy, doesn't come from our productivity and exhaustion. If we look back at Ephesians, Sally Brown, who told us about overhearing her parents' prayers for her and her brother, explains that action in Ephesians *follows* the prayer in Ephesians 3. The action is after the prayer; it does not *precede* it. Ephesians 4 and 5 discusses how they should live, with rules of what they should do and should not do. But, first, in Ephesians 3, the passage for today, we are reminded that God's love is a sheer and utter gift, not a reward for merit. God chooses to live among us, God's glory fills us. It is sheer grace, unimaginable possibility, life-giving hope.

## **Conclusion**

To experience the wideness of God's love and mercy, we can let go of:

- anxiety as a lifestyle by cultivating calm and stillness;
- being cool and "always in control" by cultivating laughter, song, and dance;
- our need for certainty by cultivating intuition and trusting faith.

To experience the length of Christ's love, we can let go of:

- perfectionism by cultivating self-compassion;
- numbing and powerlessness by cultivating a resilient spirit.

To experience the height of God's love in our homes, we can let go of:

- what people think by cultivating authenticity;
- scarcity and fear of the dark, by cultivating gratitude and joy;
- comparison by cultivating creativity.

To experience the depth of Christ's love in our work, we can let go of:

- self-doubt and "supposed to" by cultivating meaningful work;
- exhaustion as a status symbol and productivity as self-worth by cultivating play and rest.

So, as Paul prayed for the Ephesians, I pray that we all may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure with of all the fullness of God. Amen.

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**Psalm 145: 10-18; Ephesians 3:14-21**  
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