

Measurements

Ephesians 3:14-21

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A baseball great in the middle of the last century, Mickey Mantle, lived a life marked by alcoholism and, as his life came to a premature end at age 63, he was painfully aware of opportunities squandered. In his final press conference, days after receiving a liver transplant in 1995, Mantle spoke with regret: “Although I’ve heard people say they’d like to have my heart . . . it has never been used,” he reflected. “God gave me everything, and I just . . . pffft!”¹

God gives us a life of dimension. Ephesians urgently wants us to know about the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God. But too often, too many of us want none of it.

Washington Post Executive Editor Marty Baron gave a lecture recently where he asked, in regard to the times in which we are living, “How was it that so many people believed things that were untrue, even though we could document that they were false? How was it that websites created overnight could successfully disseminate falsehoods and crackpot conspiracy theories, suffering no consequences for deliberate deceit but instead gaining audience?” To answer, he points to Neil Postman’s 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. While the public worried most about an authoritarian world as envisioned by George Orwell in 1984, Postman believed a future as imagined by Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* was more likely. “Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us,” he wrote. “Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture.”²

We have been offered nothing less than the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God, and our world—in its preoccupations and distractions, in its politics and discourse, in its conceits and prejudice—appears to want none of it.

Our text from Ephesians 3 is a prayer that serves as a hinge between the descriptions of what God has done by gathering up all things in Christ, breaking down the dividing wall of hostility and creating in Christ “one new humanity,” and the last three chapters, which instruct readers about what we are to do in response. The hinge is coming to know the full dimensions of the love of God—breadth, length, height, and depth. This love is not to be described, or lived, as a hypothetical.

“It is easy enough to talk about God while remaining comfortable within the contemporary intellectual climate,” Christian Wiman has written. “Even people who would call themselves unbelievers often use it as a ready-made synonym for mystery.” But if nature abhors a vacuum, Christ abhors vagueness. If God is love, Christ is love for this one person, this one place, this one time-bound and time-ravaged self.”³

The breadth of the love of God implies that we perceive the field for love’s vision too narrowly. A few months ago, Britain’s government acted to appoint a government official for loneliness. “For far too many people, loneliness is the sad reality of modern life,” Prime Minister May said in a statement. “I want to confront this challenge for our society and for all of us to take action to address the loneliness endured by the

elderly, by carers, by those who have lost loved ones — people who have no one to talk to or share their experiences with.”⁴

Currently in Japan, people who are short on relatives can hire a husband, a mother, a daughter, a grandson. Two years ago, Kaz Nishida, a Tokyo businessman in his sixties, started renting a part-time wife and daughter. His real wife had recently died. Six months before that, their daughter, who was twenty-two, had left home after an argument and never returned. “I thought I was a strong person,” Nishida said, “but when you end up alone, you feel very lonely.” He still went to work every day, and he had friends with whom he could go out for drinks or play golf. But at night he was completely alone. He thought he would feel better over time. Instead, he felt worse.

Nishida contacted a family rental company and placed an order for a wife and a daughter to join him for dinner. The cost was about \$370. The first meeting took place at a café. The wife asked Nishida for details about how she and the daughter should act. Nishida demonstrated the characteristic toss of the head with which his late wife had rearranged her hair and his daughter’s playful way of poking him in the ribs. Then the women started acting. The rental wife called him Kazu, just as his real wife had, and tossed her head to shake back her hair. The rental daughter playfully poked him in the ribs. An observer would have taken them for a real family.⁵

A study in this country last month named Millennials as the loneliest of all our massively lonely generations. The study warned that loneliness has proven worse for health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day.⁶ And no one wants to talk about this. There are distances—large and small—where we are not bridging painful gaps. The love of God is broad, so wide, as God envisions it, that pain—and those gaps—must not remain.

The love of God also has...particular, startling length. Ephesians implores us to consider how far we will look to see the destination for God’s love.

In the same week that ABC cancelled Roseanne Barr’s TV show after Barr sent a racist tweet about Valerie Jarrett, Harvard researchers published a study estimating that, far from the 64 estimated deaths caused by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, the actual number of deaths was closer to 6,000. In that one week in May, cable news gave almost nine hours to Roseanne Barr and less than 10 minutes to victims in Puerto Rico.⁷

The temptation is to assume that the love of God won’t go as far or as long as we hope against hope it will. Or, we are afraid that the love of God will disrupt, dislocate, dis-comfort us in its long reach toward others. Well it does, it can, and it will. But we have gotten adept at choosing where and with whom love can go the distance, and where we stop it short.

It’s not unusual for the walls of kindergarten classrooms to be plastered with colorful posters. But a poster in a Somerville, Massachusetts, school this spring didn’t have anything to do with ABCs or washing hands. Handwritten in multicolored markers are words to go with the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” as kindergarteners there were taught to sing:

Lockdown, Lockdown, Lock the door
Shut the lights off, Say no more

Go behind the desk and hide
Wait until it's safe inside
Lockdown, Lockdown it's all done
Now it's time to have some fun!⁸

There is no length to which the love of God will not reach. Take all our arguments and policies and postures in the air around us today, and let's go stand in that classroom—post-Parkland, post-Sandy Hook, post-Columbine—and then let us discern together how we live this love today. God's love needs to go a long, long way—a longer, longer way—in our world.

There's the breadth...and the length...then there is the height of the poem by U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith:

Is God being or pure force? The wind
Or what commands it? When our lives slow
And we can hold all that we love, it sprawls
In our laps like a gangly doll. When the storm
Kicks up and nothing is ours, we go chasing
After all we're certain to lose, so alive—
Faces radiant with panic.⁹

Ephesians tells us it's not enough to understand the dimensions of the love of God: that understanding drives us to our knees in awe and wonder. It is the mystery by which we worship the God of creation. "Mystery" Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "is the great embarrassment to the modern mind." But we cannot live—or love—without mystery. The mystery that in Christ Jesus is now peace between God and those previously estranged from God; and peace between those hostile to one another. Ephesians does not believe this mystery can be discovered. It can only be received from God as we experience the vastness of God's love. Trusting this vastness, let alone acting on it, finds us wrestling between life as we know it...and hope.

During the first full year of the Civil War, upon her brother being drafted, Emily Dickinson wrote:

At least to pray is left, is left.
O Jesus! in the air
I know not which thy chamber is,—
I'm knocking everywhere.
Thou stirrest earthquake in the South,
And maelstrom in the sea;
Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth,
Hast thou no arm for me?¹⁰

And just like that, we've moved in mystery from the height of the love of God to the depths.

As a Game Warden Chaplain in Maine, Kate Braestrup finds herself responding to all manner of "outdoor tragedies." Usually she is there to attend to those who are lost in the woods or victims of snowmobiling accidents. Mostly she is dealing with

victims of frailty or foolishness, but not long ago, she was summoned to the scene of a crime of violent malice.

A few days before her call to the scene, a man was talking to his friend and announced that he and his estranged wife and children would soon be reunited. The friend didn't think much of this, other than they were going to give things another try, and he let it pass. A day or two later, the man brought a shotgun to his ex-wife's house and shot her. And he shot his daughter. And he shot his son. And then he turned the weapon on himself.

As the first urgent calls for help went out, game wardens were closest, so they arrived and secured the crime scene. Kate Braestrup, the chaplain on duty, was called. When she arrived, there was already yellow crime scene tape all around this little red house. Everybody had some bit of information, but all of it together didn't help them understand things. The murdered woman was the kindergarten teacher at the local school. A son of one of the paramedics was in 7th grade with the murdered daughter. One of the deputies' kids was in the woman's kindergarten classroom. She was the one who taught her child to tie her shoes. "She was wicked nice," the deputy said.

Finally, a van from the funeral home arrived, and two guys in shiny black suits got out, and the medical examiner came out to meet them. Kate Braestrup intercepted him and asked, "Dr. David, would it be ok if I said a blessing for each of the bodies as you bring them out, before we load them for transport?" She was prepared to explain this. She was ready to say that she was there to provide support and comfort to the family, but there was no family. They were all gone.

Or, she was there to help support all the officers who were standing around with their faces so carefully blank, forestalling their own rage and grief, that they might bring justice. But what justice were they going to bring to this? The murderer murdered himself too. "Dr. David, I want to retrieve this moment from evil. I want to redeem it. I want to grab hold of it and pull it back, for all of us...and for God." As it turned out, she didn't need to explain any of this. They had worked together before, and he was used to her asking this, so he just said, "Absolutely, absolutely."

So, the first body bag was brought out and put on the gurney. And Dr. David said, "Alright everybody. Kate's going to pray." And with that, the deputies and paramedics and all assembled folded their bloody gloved hands and bowed their heads. And Kate stepped forward to the gurney, and she asked, "This is the head end, right?" She raised her hand, prepared to place it on the head end of the body bag, when Dr. David said calmly, "You know, that's the shooter."

One of the deputies told her later that he saw her hand stop, in the air, frozen above the body bag. And he told her, "I wondered what you were going to pray, because all I could think of was, 'Sorry, you bastard – you're on your own.'" And she had to admit it took everything in her not to snatch her hand away.

And then she added: "So, had we found it? Had we found the threshold at which love stops?" God's love, translated as it must be through our hands and through our voices. If not at this, then at what moment can we honestly say that love no longer makes its absolute, implacable, and holy demand— "love one another."¹¹

Those last few inches of a hand ready to pray into such horror, those last few inches between intention and blessing in such brokenness—that is always the space where you and I decide if the love of God is as broad and as long and as high and as deep as we hope against hope that it is.

Our inches of decision may never be that dramatic. But if we measure God's love—all of it—and close the distance with our hands and voices, that is exactly when—and exactly where—we may come to understand the power of the One working within us, the One who is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ever ask or ever imagine.

Notes

¹ Peter Marty, "Entry Points," *Christian Century*, March 28, 2018.

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/pr/wp/2018/02/19/washington-post-executive-editor-martin-baron-delivers-reuters-memorial-lecture-at-the-university-of-oxford/?utm_term=.59a0ca46caed.

³ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss* (New York, New Your: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013).

⁴ Ceylan Yeginsu, "Britain Tackles Loneliness," *The New York Times*, January 17, 2018.

⁵ Elif Batuman, "Japan's Rent-a-Family Industry," *The New Yorker*, April 30, 2018.

⁶ <http://www.businessinsider.com/cigna-loneliness-study-americans-millennials-lonely-2018-5>.

⁷ <https://www.mediamatters.org/blog/2018/05/30/study-finds-5000-people-may-have-died-hurricane-maria-puerto-rico-cable-news-focused-roseanne/220335>, accessed June 27, 2018.

⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/06/08/lockdown-lockdown-is-a-kindergarten-nursery-rhyme-at-massachusetts-school/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7d2308cd2cb3&wpisc=nl_mix&wpmm=1, accessed June 8, 2018.

⁹ "The Weather in Space," excerpted from Tracy K Smith, *Life on Mars* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Emily Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, 1924.

¹¹ Kate Braestrup, as told on *The Moth Podcast*, April 14, 2018.