

“Beyond the Beyond”
Ephesians 3:14-21

Suzanne Pleshette was one of my favorite actresses. Perhaps you remember her from *The Bob Newhart Show*. I became a fan back in the late 50s and early 60s. When Suzanne Pleshette died in January 2008, I went to Netflix and ordered her 1962 movie *Rome Adventure*. Cathy and I watched that film again a few weeks ago. In the flick Suzanne Pleshette plays the part of Prudence Bell, a young teacher on holiday in Rome. There she meets an architectural student named Don, played by the heartthrob Troy Donahue. During their budding romance Prudence and Don were listening to the song *Al Di La* that seemed always to emerge at just the right time in the plot. Prudence, in one very melodramatic scene, asked what the words meant. Don, much more experienced in the ways and language of Italy, replied, “It means ‘beyond the beyond.’”

It might seem a little corny or a bit “new age-y” to begin a sermon in this fashion, but when I read and thought about the text for today, I thought of that expression. Our passage from Ephesians is a prayer for persons in Christ. That prayer concludes with this benediction: “May you . . . be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ’s love, and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge. So may you be filled with the very fullness of God” (vv. 18-19). The writer is trying to express something that is inexpressible. His view of God’s love is broader than his descriptive powers. He is talking about something that is “beyond the beyond.”

It is highly unlikely that Paul wrote the so-called Letter to the Ephesians. The nature of church life that this treatise depicts and the nature of the language and ideas used by the writer indicate that it was written twenty-five years after the time of Paul. Even a casual reading of Ephesians gives you an impression of how Christianity developed in the first century. Jesus concentrated on the Kingdom of God, the expression of love and justice in all relationships. He took for granted our oneness with God and proclaimed God’s compassion and acceptance of all persons. Paul, known best for his missionary travels and his theology of grace in Galatians, Romans, and Corinthians, focused on a mystical relationship with Christ.

Whoever wrote Ephesians, Colossians, The Revelation, and the later works that made it into the New Testament took those ideas a step further. In them we have glimpses of a faith that brings everything together under God's love and redemption. We have phrases such as "all in all," "immeasurably more than we can ask or conceive," "beginning and end," and such. How do you describe this attitude? You can call it a cosmic faith, a view of universal triumph, the fulfillment of love and grace. You can see how inadequate words can be.

The prayer for the reader here is one that we should receive for ourselves and one that we should extend to others. The writer of this piece prays that his readers may have "strength through the Spirit of Christ," that Christ may dwell in them in love, and that they may grasp the "breadth, length, height, and depth of Christ's love." Think about that final petition. What if you and I really came to see God's love in Christ as higher, deeper, and greater than anything we have ever imagined? What if you and I could actually believe in an unconditional, unlimited love for us and for all creation? How do you apply this "beyond the beyond" concept to practical, everyday matters? I began asking those questions last Monday when I began studying this text. All week I found situations and conversations where this awareness could make a huge difference.

It occurs to me that if this view of God's love in Christ were to settle in upon our consciousness, we could put aside our fear of what God might have in store for us. It bothers me immensely that so many persons are uneasy about God's will or concerned that God is going to punish them for something they have done or not done. We have difficulty trusting God and relating to God because we are afraid that something might be wrong between us and God or that we might not like what God is doing in the world.

Many of you grew up under the same kind of preaching and religious instruction that I did. Do you remember the revivals? I can still recall the words of the evangelists who visited my church. They would seem angry if everyone present did not make some

kind of decision. At the end of the services they would say, "Are you sure you would go to heaven if you die tonight?" Or, they would depict God's will as some stringent sacrifice that only the select few could make. And the impression was that if you fail at any point you have violated the love of God.

According to the view of love that I have come to understand through my own study of the Bible, God loves us when we succeed and God loves us when we fail; God loves us when we do what we think is his will and God loves us when we do not; God loves us when we go to church and pray and give and follow the disciplines of faith and God loves us when we do not; God loves Christians and God loves non-Christians; God loves believers and God loves atheists. I can think of nothing that puts a person out of the range of God's love. I know of nothing that makes God love one person or one group more than another. God sees us in infinite love. Beyond the beyond!

If you never have to fear God or doubt his love, if you never have to do anything to get God to love you, if you never have to worry about losing God's love, you are free to live. Life becomes an adventure. God wills that it be good. I suppose that in a normal week I deal more with the will of God than any other subject. I don't sit down in formal discussion with people about God's will. In fact, the expression itself rarely comes up. But when you talk about illness, problems, accidents, and disappointments with people, you cannot avoid the questions of why me, where is God, and is God really involved in my life.

For me God's love is comprehensive. I cannot answer all questions, I do not understand why there is pain in the world, and I realize that our knowledge is but a pinpoint in the total scheme of things. But I sense a love that is above, below, around, and within life that is guiding all things and all persons to completion and salvation. That awareness makes every day a good day. Was that why the writer of this letter prayed for his readers to know the all-encompassing love of God?

Finally, the love described here makes us comfortable with both life and death. It makes us one with Christ. We are in him and he is in us. Paul the mystic was fond of saying that he had died to self that he might live in Christ. He used every figure of speech he could find to illustrate the oneness that he felt with Christ. A disciple of his, writing here in the letter that we call Ephesians, prays for this sense of communion for all who follow the Christ.

Maxie Dunnam for many years served as editor of a devotional magazine. He tells about a friend named Sam who became a Benedictine monk. Dunnam was invited to the ceremony at which Sam was received into the order. At the ceremony Sam took his vows. Then he knelt before the altar of the chapel. He was told that one day his coffin would rest there with him inside. He was then covered with a funeral pall. Sam listened as the bell chimed for the parting of a brother. Next there was silence. Then a voice said, "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." More silence. Finally, there was a song of Easter, "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of God." At that point everyone present joined in a resurrection proclamation: "Awake, you who sleep; arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." The bells pealed. Sam stood, shook off the funeral pall, and took the robe of the Benedictine order. He announced, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

Our form of baptism and our declarations are not so dramatic. But our belief is the same. Once we are conscious of our relationship with Christ we are alive in him. We have a relationship that transcends life and death. That is part of what it means to know the "fullness of God."

That kind of freedom for living and that kind of trust in the love and good purposes of God are what we aim to know. You can't describe it. It is beyond words, even beyond our power to imagine. But it is in the mind of God because we are in the mind of God.

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