

## Love's Four Dimensions

March 8, 2020

John 3:1-17

In recent years, the passage John 3:16 has become something of a common occurrence in pop culture. You see it printed on t-shirts, bracelets, posters, and billboards, among other places. In coloring books based on Bible verses, you're guaranteed to find this verse on at least one, though probably multiple, of the pages. Many anti-war groups use this verse as the basis of their beliefs. We all know what it says, but what does it mean? What does this verse reveal to us about Jesus, about the Triune God, about how we are to act towards one another, or anything else for that matter? If it's so popular, why, when asked what it means, do so many just repeat what it says as if it's self-explanatory?

We are not alone in this experience of wondering the true depth of this passage. In today's reading, Jesus is having a conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who seeks not to trap Jesus, disprove him, or accuse him of heresy, but rather, to learn from him. Jesus is explaining to Nicodemus how one obtains salvation, how one is reborn by baptism of the Spirit and of water. He then ends with the famous passage "For God so loved the world . . ." From this point, Nicodemus then goes on his way, still confused and wondering what all of this means.

While a somewhat confusing passage leading up to this famous line, one explanation I have discovered that adds a new perspective on this text is an argument made by theologian William Hull, who argues that John 3:16 serves as part of a conversation with Paul's letter to the Ephesians, particularly 3:18-19, which read, "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." Again, we have a passage that speaks of immense love on the part of Christ and of God, and it speaks of it in four dimensions: breadth/width, length, height, and depth. It's interesting then to consider how, in response to these four dimensions, John 3:16 then tells us how deep, wide, long, and high God's love is for us.

"How wide is God's love?" John 3:16 tells us that God so loved the *world*. In this time and place, the conception of what the world was failed in comparison to what we understand today as "the world." The love that many had for others was based on their socio-economic position, sex, level of faith, and a number of other factors. The love that Christ speaks of here though, it knows no boundaries. It is a love for *all* humans, regardless of race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, political and/or religious affiliations, age, socio-economic level, etc. It is a love that has not been, is not, nor shall ever be contained by the walls built by humanity, both literally and metaphorically. That is how wide God's love is: so wide that it is uncontainable. This however only addresses one of the four dimensions.

"How long is God's love?" In other words, what lengths would God go to out of that love? John 3:16 tells us that God gave his *only* begotten Son. As we affirm with the Nicene Creed, Jesus is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father." So, Jesus is not just a human. Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus is wholly divine, sacrificed for the betterment of the wholly human. Jesus is a display that,

out of this love, God was willing to go to the ultimate lengths to reconcile the relationship between Creator and created. In all truth, the lengths of God's love, the lengths God would go to out of that love, are beyond anything we as humans can comprehend, just as was the case for its breadth.

Thirdly, we are called to wonder "How deep is God's love?" John 3:16 replies with "so that we may not perish." As humans, we are mortal, flesh and blood moving ever-closer towards death with ever second, not knowing which breath will be our last. As humans, we have come up with ways of bring that death ever-closer for others through unspeakable means, but yet, God lives among us in this path towards our perishing. Should we sink further into this perishing state, God will be there with us still. As Mikeal Parsons points out, the earliest oceanic explorations didn't have the best instruments and couldn't register the full depth of the oceans. Many explorers simply wrote, "Deeper still" in their logs, and given how deep God has come thus far with us to redeem us, we are called to do much the same, writing that the depth of God's love is "deeper still" than anything we have yet discovered. So, a third time, God's love is beyond comprehension.

Finally, we are called to wonder "How high is that love?" John 3:16 replies, saying that "those who believe in him shall have eternal life." So, having been redeemed from the "deeper still" of our sins, we are now being ascended "higher still" to a life beyond life, to a life where heaven and earth are joined together in one unified existence, where all life flourishes, where there are no walls, no depths to sink into, no greater heights to reach, no lengths that need going to. The love of God lifts us "higher still" to a life higher than anything we can comprehend. So, a fourth time, we are finding this immeasurable dimension of God's love.

In the end then, we must wonder: what does this passage mean, really? What this passage means, according to William Hull and the conversation it has with Paul's letter to Ephesus, is that, no matter who you are, God loves you. No matter what you have done or who you are, God will go to whatever lengths it takes to bring you home. No matter what you have done, God's love reaches even to you. No matter who you are or what you have done, there is eternal life to be had for you as well. There is nothing, whether in our identity or in our actions, that can separate us from the love that God has for us. With this knowledge then, it gets a person wondering, especially during this Lenten season, a time of reassessment and redirecting, how we would answer these questions. How wide is our love for God and for those created in God's image, just as we are? How deep are we willing to sink to be on the same level as others and show them the love of God, just as it has been shown to us? How high are we willing to lift others up out of that love God shows us and for God's glorification? What lengths would we go to for that love? I invite you all to consider these questions as you go forth today and continue your journeys through this Lenten season.