

Communion Service

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[0 : 00] Now, could you turn with me back to that passage that we read in Ephesians chapter 3?

And we're looking particularly at words in verse 18, but to get the sense of it, we'll need to read from a little bit further back there, just in verse 17.

This is really a prayer of Paul's for the people, the church there in Ephesus. And he's saying that God would grant, this is at the end of verse 17, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength 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, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

But especially these words in verse 18, the breadth, the length, and height, and depth. Referring to the love of Christ.

Philosophers and gurus wax eloquent about it. Books and films extol its virtues. Poets and songwriters sing its praises. Love lifts us up where we belong, where the eagles cry on a mountain high.

[1 : 23] Love lifts us up where we belong, far from the world we know, up where the clear winds blow. Of course, the Bible, too, sings the praises of love.

In the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament, there are these words, Love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame.

Many waters cannot quench love. Rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned.

And of course, in the New Testament, we have one of the most famous statements of all about love in 1 Corinthians 13. And now these remain, faith, hope, and love.

But the greatest of these is love. But as the song says, the experience of many is, love hurts.

[2 : 22] Love hurts, love scars, love wounds and mars. Some fools rave of happiness, blissfulness, togetherness. But they're not fooling me.

I know it isn't true. I know it isn't true. Love is just a lie to make you blue. And how many of us have been hurt or let down by the love of husbands, wives, lovers, and friends.

And so we can become cynical. They say it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved. But they don't have to count the cost and learn to be unloved.

Or that experience can make us long for a higher love, a wider love, a deeper love. But is there someone somewhere else who loves without reserve, accepts me as I am, and gives the love I don't deserve?

The message of the Gospel is that there is such a love, Christ's love. A love that's wider, longer, higher, and deeper than any merely human love.

[3 : 31] And I'd like us this morning to consider the dimensions of this love. First of all, the width or the breadth of Christ's love.

Christ's love is wide in this sense, first of all, that it comes to all branches of the human race. In verse 6 earlier in this chapter, Jews and Gentiles, which is a phrase that encompasses the whole world, because Gentiles simply is literally the nations.

So it was the Jewish nation and then all the other nations, the peoples of the world. Now this was the radical message of the Gospel.

That famous verse, John chapter 3, verse 16, God so loved the world. The ancient world, just like our modern world, is so divided.

So much hatred between all different types of people and classes of people and nations. But God loves the whole world. He's got the whole world in His hands.

[4 : 48] And He loves the world. Now God had narrowed down His revelation to one nation, the nation of Israel. But it had a purpose. It was in order to reach the nations, to reach the world.

Because right there at the beginning when God chose Abraham, it was that through Abraham all nations would be blessed. And those promises came to fruition in the coming of Jesus Christ. The Jewish people at that time, of course, had forgotten that. They despised the nations. They said things like, love your neighbor and hate your enemy. And by their neighbor, they meant their own Jewish neighbors and hate other nations.

And this, of course, is a problem with human love so often. It tends to be exclusive. I can love this person of this nation or this color or this culture, but not of that.

And we have all the kinds of racial prejudices and hatreds that there are today. Jesus showed none of that. Even although His ministry was the last great concentrated witness to Israel, we find Him helping Samaritans, Romans, and Greeks.

[6 : 03] And He commissioned His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. So this morning, it doesn't matter what culture or color or class you are, Christ's love reaches out to you.

He died for the world. And He wants you to know forgiveness and peace and eternal life through Him. But not only is the love of Christ wide in that sense, it's also wide in that it comes to all kinds of people with all kinds of sins.

Charlie Brown in the Peanuts cartoon famously said, I love the love of Christ. It's people I can't stand. And I think we can all identify with that kind of thought. It's great to have the idea you love everybody, but then when it comes down to individual people, it's not so easy.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 6 from verse 9, we read, Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

You think, where am I going with this? This seems to be excluding people. Well, listen to what it says next. And that is what some of you wear. Paul's writing to the church in Corinth, and he says, that's who you wear.

[7 : 36] That's the kind of people you wear. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by the Spirit of our God.

So it doesn't matter this morning what you may think that your identity is, or even your sexuality. You're not excluded from Christ's love because of that.

The people in Corinth discovered that. There were all sorts there. But they came to know the love of Christ. His love will cause radical changes in how you may view your identity, because his love is a transforming love, but he loves you nonetheless.

He has died for people of all sorts and identities with all kinds of sins. But not only that, Christ's love is wide in this sense also.

It comes to all kinds of personalities. The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, by the grace of God, I am what I am. He's talking about the fact that our other apostles, and they've all got their gifts, but he says, by the grace of God, I am what I am.

[8 : 52] It's not a boast. It's saying, it's by the grace of God that he has taken me and used me. So we have in the New Testament different personalities.

We have the extrovert, impulsive Peter, and the more introvert, thoughtful John. We've got the highly intellectual Paul, and Barnabas, who was much more a people person.

And we have the sensitive Mary, and her sister, the practical Martha. We have the highly religious and respectable Nicodemus, and the disreputable, and we should say also, the feisty Samaritan woman that Jesus met there by the well.

Jesus loved all these different personality types, and his love is wide enough to embrace you also this morning, no matter what personality you are, no matter what your background, his love extends.

His love is big enough and wide enough to extend to everyone. So Christ's love is broad or wide, but also we think about another dimension of his love, and that is the length of Christ's love.

[10 : 07] What does that mean? How can love be long? Well, Christ's love is long in the sense, first of all, that it comes from all eternity. In Ephesians chapter 1, earlier in this very letter, verses 4 and 5, Now, sometimes when we read those kind of words, we feel a wee bit scary, you know.

chosen before the creation of the world. It all sounds a bit crazy, a bit scary, but it shouldn't, because this is absolutely staggering.

If you are a Christian today, it's not simply because of some decision you took. That's important. You came to faith. It's not even because God loves you now.

That's important. It's not even just because Christ died for you. That's supremely important. But it is ultimately because he loved you from all eternity.

A powerful, effective, non-negotiable, eternal love. If that doesn't make you humble this morning, then nothing will.

[11 : 35] It's not because you are a great person. It's not because you had so much to offer God. He loved you before you even existed. He knew you were going to exist, and he loved you.

There are, of course, different types of human love, we talk about a whirlwind romance, you know, where people just suddenly fall in love. But a different love is when perhaps someone has loved you from a distance for a long time, waited many years through all your mistakes and broken romances, waited for the right time to declare their love.

Perhaps Jesus has waited a long time for you throughout your whole life, but his love is long. Will you respond to his love now?

Christ's love is also long in this sense, that it's for life. There's a word used in the Old Testament for love, sometimes translated covenant love, or steadfast love, or constant love, or faithful love.

It's a word that's very much tied into God's covenant with his people. And that's what God's love is. It's committed. It's steadfast.

[12 : 55] It's constant. Our human love is so fickle, isn't it, at times. Carl King had a song called, Will You Love Me Tomorrow? I'd like to know that your love is love I can be sure of.

So tell me now, and I won't ask again, Will you still love me tomorrow? Human loves are full of such doubts. You don't need to have doubt about Jesus' love.

You don't need to ask him, Will you still love me tomorrow? Because he said he'll be with us always, to the very end of the age. He said that he'll never leave us or forsake us.

He said that he is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He doesn't change. Somerset Malm, the famous playwright, said, We're not the same persons this year as last, nor are those we love.

It's a happy chance if we, changing, continue to love a changed person. And we know that experience. As we get older, we change.

[14 : 04] The people we love change, but that love still remains. Jesus loves us through all the changes. However we may have changed, he does not change.

And his love does not change towards us. George Matheson, who became a minister in the 19th century, wrote a very famous hymn that's still sung today, O Love That Will Not Let Me Go.

He was engaged to be married, and he started going blind. The engagement was broken off. And some time later, on the occasion of a sister's wedding, he wrote that famous hymn.

O love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee. I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths, its flow may richer, fuller be.

He knew the love that would not let him go. Do you know that love this morning? That's the love that we celebrate today, as we remember the Lord's death for us.

[15 : 12] Other loves may fail us, but Christ's love never. It's all so long in this sense, Christ's love. It is to all eternity.

Again, to quote Somerset Maugham, the playwright, he said, the love that lasts longest is the love that has never returned. He's talking about unrequited love, you know, that goes on and on and on. Not a very healthy thing. But he's wrong about that, isn't he? Because the love that lasts longest is Christ's eternal love.

It's not just for now, it's not just for this life, it's for all eternity. That famous verse I quoted at the beginning, John 3, 16, for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have, have what?

Eternal life. So we'll know that love eternally. Christ's love extends beyond the grave. In John 14, later in John's Gospel, he says, in my Father's house are many rooms.

[16 : 17] If it were not so, I would have told you. I'm going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so that you also may be where I am.

Or in John 17, Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. See, this love is not till death us do part. Human love is like that. But this love is forever. Charles Spurgeon, the great 19th century preacher, said, when the time comes for you to die, you need not be afraid because death cannot separate you from God's love.

Christ's love is long. It's from all eternity to all eternity. But also, there's the third dimension, the height of Christ's love.

Christ's love is high. It's high in the sense it comes to us from heaven, from the very heart of God. It comes down to us from on high.

[17 : 32] Now, of course, it's great to be loved by family and friends, people like ourselves. But what if you were loved by someone famous, a prince or a princess, a pop star or a film star, a famous writer or a sports person, whatever floats your boat?

Somebody great, famous. Well, apart from anything else, it would do your self-esteem no end of good, wouldn't it, to be loved by someone like that? But that's just nothing compared to Christ's love for us because he is the prince of glory.

He's the eternal son of God. He's the king of kings and lord of lords. And yet he loves me. And if you're a Christian, he loves you.

Second Corinthians chapter eight, we read these words, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, become rich.

A famous old hymn says, There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in. There wasn't anyone else good enough.

[18 : 56] There wasn't anyone else great enough or high enough to do this. Only Jesus could do it. Only the highest, the noblest, the most glorious person. And he did it because he loved us.

So, Christ's love is high because it comes from heaven. It's coming down to us. But also, it can be understood to be high in this sense that it can reach us at our highest.

It can reach us, perhaps, if we're high in status in society. 1 Corinthians 1, Brothers, think of what you were when you were called.

Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were influential. Not many were of noble birth. Now you might think, again, where am I going with that? Because he seems to be saying the opposite of what I'm saying.

But think exactly what he says. Not many of you were, but some were. Yes, there were many slaves and servants and the lowest of the low.

[20 : 01] But also, there were people who were higher. Think of the Apostle Paul himself. He was a Pharisee of the Pharisees. He was someone who had everything going for him in life. And yet, Christ also could reach him.

Revelation chapter 21, verse 24. The nations will walk by its light. That's the light of the city of God. And the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.

Yes, the gospel is for the poor and needy, but it is also for the rich and the powerful if they will bow the knee before him. And all the gifts that we may have as individuals, whatever they may be, if we believe in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, these will be brought into the city of God.

So, if you're high up in any way, you're not excluded. He loves you in spite of all that. And He has something for you to do in His service. Christ's love is high also in this sense that it can come to us at the high points of our lives.

We sometimes think that it's only when we're at our lowest that Christ reaches us. Maybe everything is going well with you. Maybe you feel you don't need His love. Think of the Apostle Paul again when He was known as Saul of Tarsus.

[21 : 26] There He was. Everything in life was great for Him. He was riding into Damascus to demand the persecution of the Christians. And Jesus met with him and turned His life totally around because He loved him.

Jesus' love can reach us at our times of high emotion, high achievement, or even of high self-importance. His love can break through to anyone at any time.

But of course, Christ's love is high in this sense that it lifts us up. Mostly, we need to be lifted up. Psalm 113 says, He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap.

He seats them with princes with the princes of their people. Who did Jesus choose as His apostles? Fishermen, despised tax collectors, an ex-terrorist, and He lifted them up to the place of eternal honor.

Jesus, in His love, wants us to be with Him where He is. And where is He? He's seated at the right hand of God in the place of honor and power.

[22 : 44] So no matter how poor and needy we may be in this world, if our faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ and in His love, we're lifted up by this high and mighty love of the Lord Jesus.

Ephesians chapter 2, previous chapter to the one we're looking at, God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

Well, finally and fourthly, there is the depth of Christ's love, the final emotion, the final dimension of Christ's love. How is Christ's love deep?

Well, it's deep, first of all, in the depths to which He went. Jesus spoke of Himself as the bread that came down from heaven. John chapter 6.

And the second Corinthians chapter 8, we already read this. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor so that you through His poverty might become rich.

[23 : 56] the whole of Jesus' ministry was coming down. He came down to be born in a manger. He came down in being a refugee before He was two years old, a refugee and an asylum seeker we may see in Egypt.

He came down in being a working man, working as a carpenter with His hands. He came down and having nowhere to lay His head when He went about in His public ministry.

He came down by taking the very nature of a servant as Paul puts it, taking the likeness of sinful flesh as he puts it somewhere else. That is one of the most amazing statements in the New Testament.

And it's a very carefully balanced statement. It means that He was so like an ordinary person that people could hardly distinguish the difference.

He came, as it were, almost anonymously. Some people would even say that He was sinful. Well, He wasn't because He appeared just so like us.

[25 : 12] He came down. He came down by making Himself vulnerable to hostility and hatred, to temptation and suffering.

He came down by taking on Himself the sins of the world and enduring what those sins, your sins and mine, deserve. There's an old hymn that says, none of the ransomed ever knew how deep were the waters crossed, nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through.

Here He found His sheep that was lost. Because Jesus went down to the very pit of hell. That's why He cried out on the cross, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

What is hell? It has been absolutely alienated from God. And that was Christ's experience on the cross as He bore the sins of the world.

That's how deep Christ's love is. But also, of course, His love is deep in the sense that it can reach us at our lowest.

[26 : 32] Someone once said to me that I'd known them at their worst and at their best. And that's quite something, isn't it? But Jesus has certainly seen us at our worst.

He knows our sinfulness far better than we do ourselves. And His love comes to us in the depths of sorrow or despair or depravity, whatever our needs may be.

there's a song by Bob Dylan called The Chimes of Freedom which always in my mind kind of sums up this idea. It was written as a result of him and a friend being caught in a thunderstorm and they took shelter I think in the doors of a church or something and the church bell was ringing and the thunder was rolling and the lightning was flashing and he wrote this song where he says that these chimes of freedom were tolling for the aching ones whose wounds cannot be nursed for the countless confused, accused, misused, strung out ones and worse and for every hung up person in the whole wide universe and we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing.

Now that's poetry but the reality is in Christ because Christ's love has reached all kinds of needy people in this world. It reached a Samaritan woman who had been married five times and was now living with another man.

Christ's love reached a widow in the depths of despair because she'd now lost also her son. Christ's love reached a synagogue ruler whose little 12-year-old daughter had died.

[28 : 12] Christ's love reached a procession of the prostitute who came and washed his feet with her tears of repentance. Christ's love comes down into the very depths of human experience.

Now you may not think you're as low down as any of these people. Maybe not. Maybe you're more low down. I don't know. But his love can reach you. Paul in speaking of his own experiences in 1 Timothy 1 Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst or the chief of sinners.

That's how he felt. And he describes himself in that same chapter a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man. But he was also able to say I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

So if his love was deep enough to reach down to the Apostle Paul, if it was deep enough to reach to all these different types of people is deep enough to reach you.

Victor Hugo in his famous book *Les Miserables* says, the greatest happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved. Loved for ourselves or rather loved in spite of ourselves.

[29 : 34] Like David, can you say, Lord, from the depths to you I cried. Mother Isa once said, the hunger for love is much more difficult to satisfy than the hunger for bread.

But there is a love that can satisfy that hunger. It's Christ's love, the dimensions of which are infinite. Neil Young in a song said, only love can break your heart.

And for many people, of course, that sums up the failure of love. But also, in a strange sense, it sums up the effect of the greatest love. Oscar Wilde in his poem *The Ballad of Reading Jail*, when he really was a broken and a repentant man, he said, how else but through a broken heart may Lord Christ enter in?

Do you know that breaking of the heart because of Christ's great love to you? Sigmund Freud, the great psychologist, wrote in a letter to his fiancée, how bold one gets when one is sure of being loved.

Are you sure of being loved today by the Lord Jesus Christ? Can you sing with the words of Wesley, bold I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown through Christ my own.

[31 : 03] You can do that because of Christ's great love to you, the dimensions of which are infinite and eternal and powerful to change our lives.

Let's pray. Our loving Heavenly Father, look down in mercy upon us, show us your love. You have showered us with blessings so many.

Enable us today to be sure of your love and to be bold in our faith because of it. Lord, grant us we in a few moments will come to the Lord's table remembering his death to have our minds full of his great love towards us.

And so we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.