

“God our Good Shepherd: Expansive Love”

Psalms 23, 1 John 3:16-18, 4:16B, Ephesians 3:14-21

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Prayer for Understanding Eternal Spirit, you flow through the ages from the pages of Scripture, transforming hearts with your challenge, moving those who hear to new acts of faith, courage, and mission. Bless our hearts and minds in the reading of the Word, so that we might know your presence and power more fully. We pray in the name of the Living Word. Amen.

For my birthday, Leslie and I hiked into the Grand Canyon. We got ready in the predawn darkness and took the shuttle to the South Kaibab trail. The temperature was in the 20s. I carried clothes for all weather conditions, 128 ounces of water, food, and safety gear. I was told that to experience the vast wonder and breathtaking majesty of the Grand Canyon one needs to hike down into it. After some switchbacks along the rim wall the Kaibab trail follows a ridge out into the canyon. Everything changes with each step, the colors and texture of the rock, the shrinking sky, the expanding canyon, the air movement, the wildlife, the vegetation. I was surprised to discover that a section of the canyon wall is various shades of green and another section is black. Some rocks sparkled and shined. We took the flat Tonto Trail, which is framed with a variety of vegetation, mostly adorned with sharp surfaces to protect the valuable water within from thirsty critters. The temperature at this lower elevation was in the 80s. In this area, the canyon is approximately 11 miles wide and it is 3,260 feet to the rim. From what we could see, it appeared that we were at the bottom of the canyon. Suddenly, we were standing on the edge of a 1,600-foot cliff to the river below. It was a delight to hike the trail that was carved into the cliff wall 3,260 feet up, 1,600 feet down, and a tiny 19-inch ledge. The view was spectacular. Just as suddenly the plateau returned. On the horizon was a vibrant green. As it came into focus, we saw budding trees along the river. When we got there, we heard the soothing sounds of the river and enjoyed the shade of the trees. We took the Bright Angel Trail back to the rim. As the sun set, the colors of the canyon changed and became luminescent. We topped out just after sunset completing our 16-mile, 13-hour journey.

My experience of the Grand Canyon is like my experience of God's love. I am in awe of the enormity of God's ever-growing love. I am filled with wonder as I attempt to perceive the grand spectacular majesty of God's love. There have been a few times in my life when all seems glorious as I delight in savoring God's love. Then something happens revealing an entire facet of God's love that I never dreamed could be possible. All of us will enjoy exploring ever-growing facets of God's love for eternity.

Around 6 million people visit the Grand Canyon each year. Many delight in the grand views. Only one percent venture more than halfway into the canyon. Perhaps this is like life on earth. Many delight in the grandeur of God's love. Only a few perceive more than quick glances. Saul was transformed to Paul by God's love. As the Apostle Paul was savoring God's grace for everyone he prayed. **Ephesians 3:14-21 NLT “When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to God the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from God's glorious, unlimited resources God will empower you with inner strength through the Holy Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in God. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep God's love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. Now all glory to God, who is able, through God's mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to God in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.”** I echo Paul's prayer for all people, and myself, to continually perceive more of God's grand love.

Where we create voids in God's love there is fear. Fear leads to evil, worry, lies, hoarding, judging, tyranny, hate, isms, violence, murder. The solution to every fear is love. We are journeying through a time laden with valleys of the shadow of death, times that urge us to fear. God's love is everlasting and steadfast. God will get us through every valley to cleansing, invigorating love.

The psalmist sings. **Psalm 23 “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. God maketh me to lie down in green pastures: God leadeth me beside the still waters. God restoreth my soul: God leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for God's name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**

After 14 miles of hiking in extremely dry conditions we were exhausted, hungry, and thirsty. The humidity in the Grand Canyon dipped below 10%. Simply breathing required regular hydration. The Indian Garden campground was our green pasture. The only source of fresh water on our hike. We drink around 90 ounces of water. Our protein bars were robust with delicious flavor. We rested on a picnic table and cared for our feet. After around a half an hour we were energized for our four- and one-half mile hike up 3,000 feet to our hotel, with a hot shower, and soft bed.

God's love energizes us, restoring our soul. God's love brings us home. God's love unites us. God is the gate who unites all the different groups of humanity into one loving eternal family for surely, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Scripture declares **1 John 3:16-18 NLT** **"We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So, we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God's love be in that person? Dear children, let us not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions."**

We are called to love one another. God loves us. There is nothing we can do to stop, impede, hinder, disturb, distort, diminish, or damage God's love for us and all people. God is love. God loves all people. In response to the love that God has for us, we are able to love one another. It is not our love to give; it is God's love. We all benefit when anyone expresses God's love. Sometimes we do not know how to love, yet we all have the gift of love. God fills us with love. We are designed to love all people, and love God, whether we recognize our design to love or not. God's infinite love is within us. We will never run out of love to share. Love is never lost. Love endures forever. Love is always expanding.

Pastor Jocelyn Cadwallander said, "Trust and love tend to be interchanged and often intertwined. We must feel like we can trust one another before we can love one another. Because we become so arrogant to believe that the love we possess and have to give is only of ourselves, a gift of only ourselves, we become protective of love. We guard love. We do not distribute our love unless we are sure that love will be received, respected, that it will be appreciated by the other. We do not want our hearts to be hurt, to be broken. The fear of our love not being appreciated drives our need to trust before loving; our own hearts condemn us. In this process to loving, we often first approach each other with doubt. Then we earn one another's trust, a process of questions, of discerning, of testing. When we feel we can trust, we love."

Jocelyn continues, "It seems to me that our scripture lessons are encouraging us to—instead of going through the arduous process of earning trust before opening the heart—simply love first with God's love. Instead of assuming hurt as we protect what love we think we can give on our own, we might assume God's love to give and be boldly confident in love before God. Instead of assuming that different is suspect, perhaps we might assume that there might be new perspective into who God is. When we pass the tollbooth operator, instead of assuming that is their only status in life and one undeserving of a simple hello and look in the eye, assume they are more. When we come into the church, instead of assuming there are politics at hand, there are agendas in mind, assume the other is there to love God and love you. In community, our nature does not lend itself to loving first and loving well. If it did, I am sure there would not be so much instruction in the scriptures as to how to love. Our lesson today shares with us that we are released from the pressure of having to earn trust, from the process of discerning if the other is worthy, because it is not our own love that we have to distribute. It is God's love. It is our Good Shepherd's, and we are confident that God loves all."

Jocelyn continues, "Must we agree with one another? Believe the same things? Make or hope people believe what we as individuals believe? No. Perhaps in addition to the frustration that might accompany the struggle to find conversation, to find some common ground, we might also include in that list of questions, 'If you don't believe what I do, and you haven't experienced what I have, then what is your experience of God? And how might my journey be informed by that?'"

Jocelyn concludes, "Now, keep in mind, I said, "informed" not "conformed." Each of us come into the community with different understandings of God, and it is our blessing that we might share that with one another. It is not about changing each other's minds. It is not about one being more right or better than the other. Simply it is to release ourselves of the burden of focusing on ourselves and to share the experience of God that we have as individuals for the benefit of the community."

Scripture proclaims **1 John 4:16B NRSV** **"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."** We are called to love one another, to love those who are like us and those who are different, to love those with whom we disagree, to love those whom we struggle to see the goodness, the image of God under all the fear. We are called to love our enemies, to love everyone.

Barbara Brown Taylor discusses the practice of loving others. "Like the practices of paying attention, wearing skin, walking on the earth, and getting lost, the spiritual practice of love requires no special setting, no personal

trainer, no expensive equipment. Love can be done anywhere, by anyone who resolves to love. A good way to warm up is to focus on one of the human beings who usually sneak right past you because they are performing some mundane service such as taking your order or handing you your change. Try recognizing the tollbooth operator, the cashier at the grocery store, the barista at your local coffee shop. This person has more of a story to them. You do not need to invite them over for dinner; you do not need to inquire about their troubles or their joys. Love is a recognition of their presence.”

Love is a recognition that their life matters, that their love will be resurrected and preserved in heaven for eternity. Love recognizes that you will celebrate with them for eternity as you explore together God’s ever-expanding love. Every instance is abundant with new loves to discover. Every moment is abundant with surprises of entire new facets of love to perceive. God’s grand love is uniting all people together. We will rejoice in the glory of God’s ever-expanding love.

The wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers includes that the hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self—to encounter another human being not as someone you can help, save, enroll, convince, change, use, fix or control, rather simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it.”

Each one of us is different. We have had different experiences, and we have different personalities. We connect with God in different ways. We worship God in different ways. We love God in different ways. We love others in different ways. Throughout creation God creates with great variety, diversity, and uniqueness. God creates each person a one-of-a-kind masterpiece. God’s love honors each person’s uniqueness by not trying to conform anyone to be like another, rather by helping each person shine with their uniqueness, to love in their unique way. We will experience the grandeur of God’s love when each person is true to their self, shares their unique perspective and everyone else listens to every person. We experience the grandeur of God’s expansive love when we love one another. Amen