

**Deep and Wide
February 14, 2010
Ephesians 3.14-19**

For this reason I bow my knees before God, the Creator, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 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.

Intro

When I realized that I would be preaching on February 14, it got me to thinking about...what else? Love! With four daughters growing up over the years, we had a lot of Cupid's arrows flying around and some were better aimed than others! Our oldest daughter set the stage, sometime late in high school, with the first "boyfriend." Will, a really nice guy, and our daughter, Erin, were mutually interested. They went out on a few dates, and then one afternoon, Will stopped by the house with a beautiful bouquet of fresh flowers. He knew that Erin was at track practice and he wanted to leave a surprise for her. I thought...how sweet! We exchanged some pleasantries and then, noticing that he was holding these flowers in a cellophane wrapper, I asked if he would like some water. He said, "Sure." So I got the perfect-sized glass flower vase out of the cupboard and filled it with fresh water. I handed it to Will; but instead of putting the flowers in it, he assumed I was giving him a really generous-sized glass of drinking water and he drank it...all!! For some reason, this really tickled me and I laughed...heartily. Until I realized that Will was not laughing and that he was perplexed, and then embarrassed...and I felt terrible. I tried to regain my composure and rectify the situation, but it was awkward to say the least. Like most high school romances, this relationship didn't last long and I was hoping that it wasn't I who brought on the demise. There is certainly a learning curve even, and maybe especially, for moms, when Cupid comes calling.

And today we celebrate that day when we remember and appreciate the love we share with one another...with sweethearts, with family, with friends. And I think that the wonderful Sunday school teachers among us will agree, that one of primary lessons that we learn in Sunday school from the nursery on up is that: God is love.

Ephesians 3

In reflecting on love, I went again at this passage in Ephesians that Olivia read. It is as if Paul invites us to look at the universe – to the limitless sky above, to the immeasurable horizons on every side, to the depth of the earth and the seas beneath and then says, “The love of Christ, the love of God incarnate, is as deep and as wide as that.” Interestingly, these four dimensions, these measurements beyond all measure, are all governed by one article in Greek; which we lose in the English translation. They all refer to one thing – the love of Christ – God’s love made known in Jesus. There is no person who is outside the love of God; there is no place which is out of the reach of God; there is no experience which the love of God will refuse in order to reach one person.ⁱ It is a love which is beyond our measure, our experience and our comprehension.

What if...

And I wonder, if and when we, in our human finiteness, limit God’s infinite love? What if...God loves us with such patience and such persistence, that God’s deepest wish is to be in relationship with each and every human being, forever? What if...God will not stop loving us until every person has taken his or her place in the kingdom?ⁱⁱ What if...God, in God’s limitless love, saves every person?

In his essay on Universal Restoration, written for Brethren Press, Frank Ramirez, pastor of the Everett, PA CoB, says that, “One of the things that struck me the first time I read the Bible from cover to cover is that justice, not salvation, is the major issue presented consistently from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, through the entire New Testament. He asks, “If justice and mercy are at the heart and soul of the Bible, is it justice to sentence someone to eternal and horrific punishment for crimes committed within a finite time, regardless of how horrible the crime? God established a kingdom of love, he says, and after all, this same God counsels us to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Views of Afterlife

The subject of eschatology – the ultimate destiny of humankind – has always received much attention in our Christian tradition. We are all familiar with the revival preachers who set forth heaven and hell and that after death, one either goes “up” to heaven or “down” to join the devil’s minions forever.

Historically, however, there has been no consensus on the issue of eschatology. Since the early church, there have been many viewpoints that cover the broad spectrum of ways Christians think about God’s judgment, God’s love, and the afterlife.

In what we might call the traditional view, one with which many of us are familiar and which is promoted by many Christian churches today – the soul is immortal by nature and will spend eternity either in the ecstasy of heaven or in the torments of hell. Most who hold this view concede that the vast majority of humankind throughout all the ages will endure the latter. Once death occurs, it's too late to repent and believe. The grave fixes one's destiny – it's permanent. In light of this belief, the mission of the Christian church has often been one of rescuing people from eternal hell. Augustine was among the most prominent theologians to expound this view.

Another view is “Universal Opportunity Before Death.” This suggests that all people are given the opportunity to be saved by God's sending the gospel, maybe even through angels or in a dream, as late as at the moment of death. Justin Martyr, John Wesley, and C.S. Lewis are among the proponents of this view.

The belief proposed by Ramirez, and embraced by many Christians, is called “Universal Restoration.” The issue here is not whether the soul is mortal or immortal. It is this: all human beings will ultimately enjoy redemption and the presence of God forever. Some find the abundant life on this side of the grave – “the saints.” Others will receive an opportunity to believe after death. But all will eventually be saved. This isn't new – in fact this belief was held and promoted by Origen, 2nd century scholar and theologian and father of the early Christian church.

Brethren Heritage

We Brethren certainly have roots in the “Universal Restoration” point of view. Many of the 18th century Radical Pietists, such as Hochmann von Hochenau, believed and taught universal restoration and had great influence on the movement that was to become the Brethren. Alexander Mack himself, one of the first eight who gathered at the Eder River 302 years ago, was a universal restorationist. In his writings, A. Mack expressed his belief in God's universal salvation; but interestingly enough, concluded that this must be taught and held privately – he thought it's teaching to be only for the spiritually mature. This belief in universal restoration accompanied the Brethren to America. At Germantown, a well-known speaker cited the Dunkers (the early Brethren) as excellent examples of people who believed in universal restitution and yet maintained the strong moral and ethical standards of Christ.^{iv} Vernard Eller, ordained minister in the Church of the Brethren and retired professor of philosophy and religion at the University of La Verne, provides a clear biblical basis substantiating universal restoration in his book, *The Most Revealing Book of the Bible*. Among others, he cites the passage from Revelation 21; that in the New Jerusalem, the “gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there.” In other words, the action of salvation will not be completed until all have entered.

So What?

In January 2005, Jim Lehman wrote a “Media Review” article for the Church of the Brethren *Messenger*.^v In it, he reviewed the book “If Grace is true,” by Quaker authors Philip Gulley and James Mulholland. This article drew a lot of conversation about the book which makes a case for universalism. I overheard a fellow Brethren who was very critical of this book even being featured in *Messenger* and her response was, “well, if that's true, then why bother?” She raised the question, if everyone will be saved, why does it matter how we live this life? Why should we even bother?

What if salvation isn't about what happens after we die, but about what begins when we realize that God loves us? Then our dilemma is not about original sin, but our challenge is that we don't understand our own full potential. When God created us, God called us very good! Salvation, then, is about being freed from every obstacle to intimacy with God, who loves us and loves this world so much. Salvation is not an event, it's a process. What if we focus not on heaven and hell, but on creating a new earth? Believing in God's universal salvation can change the world as we envision and work for a world shaped by God's redemptive love for all.

Perhaps we could even say that Jesus was a universalist. Jesus believed that every human being was created by God and was, therefore, of great value – of such great value that each was worthy of the loving attention and assistance of others. Although he understood the differences between Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans, black, white, lepers, the healthy, rich and poor, powerful and weak, when Jesus saw individuals, he perceived them as members of the same human family who stood in need of receiving and expressing certain values which Jesus held to be uncompromising – the values of love of God, each other and self. Jesus appreciated the potential of all people as human beings, created by the same God, capable of living together in peace and harmony.

What if we proclaim that Jesus came to show us **the way, the truth and the life** – by articulating God's vision that sees all people as deserving love? What if we believe that God will save every person? It alters our whole perception of every human being in the world. Then we treat each and every person as a child of God, in whom God is at work, and know that they, too, are the beloved of God. And we would live our life in such a way that others are drawn to God and God's boundless love.

In the second interview that I had with the search committee before coming to Elizabethtown, Pastor Greg asked me, “What would keep you from coming to E'town?” I remember my answer: “Because I love the people with whom I serve.” To which Melanie replied, “We're lovable, too.” And I have found it so...you not only are lovable, you are loving. I have seen your love, deep and wide, extend to one another and beyond these walls, in tangible expressions of care and concern as you:

- Teach the children among us and assure them of God's love and care.
- Carefully and prayerfully write books that inspire a better world, a world of justice and reconciliation.

- Lovingly tend this building and the grounds; that it might be a facility that is not only useful, but hospitable to the community.
- take seriously the call to care for creation in productive and creative ways and
- Work toward the things that make for peace.

I am grateful that:

- We fully and lovingly support our youth and their spiritual growth; especially this year as they prepare for NYC, that they too, might experience God's love in new and transforming ways...
- We have served as a sanctuary for displaced persons, risking personal safety for the welfare of others.
- For intergenerational events such as the Wind in the Willows, that encourage people of all ages to use their gifts and bring the community together.
- We have made a conscious decision to be a church which is open and welcoming to all.
- We have loving and gifted colleagues who, with sensitivity, ease and humor, inspire us to live fully and be who we believe God is calling us to be.
- We embrace the mission of learning to live the love of God...peacefully, simply and together.

God needs the church to tell all people of God's love and God's mercy. The church is the complement of Christ – the Body of Christ – hands and feet and a voice to continue the work of Jesus. **This is why we bother! This is what it's all about!**

And so we gather together, and we remind one another - of the limitless sky above, the immeasurable horizons on every side, the depth of the earth and the seas beneath. Together we say, "The love of Christ, the love of God incarnate, is as deep and as wide as that."

Gulley and Mulholland conclude their book with this thought: "At the great banquet, the only tears will be tears of joy. We will see: fundamentalist Christian embracing Ghandi; a humbled Hitler washing the feet of a Jewish Holocaust victim with his tears, Paul shaking hands with a Japanese pilot, Jesus kissing Judas; the lion lying down with the lamb."^{vi} And then we will know and fully understand....the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love. May it be so!

i *The Daily Study Bible*, William Barclay, p. 155.
 ii *Messenger*, January 2005, Media Review by James H. Lehman, p. 26.
 iii *Perspectives: Universal Restoration* by Frank Ramirez, p. 18.
 iv *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, p. 1292.
 v *Messenger*, January 2005, p. 26.
 vi *If Grace is Really True*, Gulley and Mulholland.