

9.19.2021 Trinity 16 (Ephesians 3:18-19)

Throughout the New Testament we see examples of St. Paul praying for the people of God. To the Romans he writes, “*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing...*” (Romans 15:13). To the Thessalonians, “*Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way...*” (2 Thessalonians 3:16). To the Philippians, “*And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more...*” (Philippians 1:9). And in the Epistle we read this morning St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, this prayer for the Church, that we “*may be able to comprehend with all saints, what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge...*” (Ephesians 3:18-19).

Each of these prayers were written first to a particular people - the Romans, Thessalonians, Philippians or Ephesians. St. Paul, as the human author of these words, had no idea we would be reading them at St. Andrew's today. Yet the fact that we read those words today is no surprise to God, and as the Divine Author of Holy Scripture, He clearly intends these words to be a prayer for us as well, a prayer that *we may know* the love of Christ, which passes knowledge.

In his prayer, Paul speaks of comprehending *the breadth and length and depth and height*, as if striving to gain an understanding of some mysterious measurement will help us know the love of Christ. Paul doesn't tell us what measurement he's referring to, but many Church Fathers and theologians have suggested that St. Paul is referring to the Cross. The height and depth, and breadth and length of the love of God, measured on the Cross of Christ.

The Cross is an infinite measurement of the very particular and sacrificial way that God loves us, and when we *survey the wondrous Cross*, when we measure the height and depth, and breadth and length, we find God's love for us to be a love which will risk anything, and suffer anything. A love that will not rest. A love that will hunger and thirst, and suffer and die for the sake of His beloved. A love that is not a sentimental feeling, but an act of the Divine will of God.

This morning we heard St. Paul pray for us, that we *may be able to comprehend with all saints, what is the breadth and length and depth and height*, and so we ask, what is the breadth of the Cross of Christ? When we look to Holy Scripture to provide the answer, we find the Cross to be as wide as the world, for our Savior died for the world, as St. John wrote, “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son” (John 3:16), and again John states, “He is the propitiation for our sin: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2), and St. John isn’t the only one who identifies the breadth of the Cross to be this great. When John the Baptist saw Jesus walking toward him, he proclaimed to the people these familiar words, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus tasted death “for everyone” (Hebrews 2:9), and St. Paul wrote to Timothy, “*For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all...*” (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

Jesus himself spoke of the breadth of the Cross being as wide as the world when He said, “*I am the living bread that came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh*” (John 6:51), and later in John’s Gospel account our Lord said, “*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth (on the Cross), will draw all people to Myself*” (John 12:32).

That’s a lot of Scripture, and I share those words with you today, instead of my own, so that you may know, with complete certainty, that God loves you, that He sent His only Son to die for you. The breadth of the Cross is as wide as the world. God doesn’t limit the Atonement, humanity through unbelief and a stubborn, hard-hearted refusal to simply accept His love limits the Atonement. On the Cross our Lord made one “full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world,” and we find true rest in the assurance of His love and the fact that now there’s nothing for us to do but believe. By His grace, through faith in His Son, believe the breadth of the Cross is as wide as the world.

And what is the length of the Cross of Christ? Perhaps, in a finite, limited way, the length of the Cross could be measured in time. Perhaps we can

consider what our Lord accomplished on the Cross, the Salvation of the world, that which He accomplished at one moment in time now stretching both forward and backward throughout all time. In that sense we could say that, in time, as long as there is one sinner to be saved, as long as there is pain, suffering, sorrow, or death, as long as there is anything contrary to God or harmful to His people, the Cross stands. The Cross stands throughout all time as a sign that God will redeem all He allows. If through the worst evil ever committed, the death of His Son, God brought about the Salvation of the world, then what will He make of our suffering. When we look at our moments of suffering in light of the Cross, we look forward in time and wonder, in what glorious ways will God redeem our trials and sorrows? That is the length of the Cross.

And what is the height of the Cross of Christ? The Cross is as high as the highest heaven, reaching to that most Holy place where our Lord sits at the right hand of God. People speak of “thin places.” Those places where the distance between heaven and earth seems to collapse, and we find ourselves in the very presence of God. The Table which will soon be set for us, this place where we will receive the Body and Blood of our Lord is a thin place. Biblical examples of thin places would be: Moses standing on holy ground at the burning bush (Exodus 3), Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego standing with Another in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3), the place where the disciples gathered on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), St. Paul’s encounter with our Lord on the Damascus road (Acts 9), or the “thinnest” example, at the Cross on Calvary (Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19). On the Cross our Lord, God clothed in human flesh, died for the sins of the whole world, and as He hung there heaven came down to earth, and earth ascended to heaven. In his suffering and death our Lord, being both God and man, revealed to “*every tribe and language and people and nation*” (Revelation 5:9) that the Cross is as high as the highest heaven.

The breadth and length and height, and now the depth. The depth of the Cross is also best understood through the lens of Scripture. In Psalm 139:8 David wrote, “*If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.*” The Cross is as high as the highest heaven, and yet it is also through the Cross of Christ that God reaches down into the deepest pit

of sin and despair. In 2 Peter we learn that God is “*not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9). God is not willing that any should perish, and so through the Cross He reaches down, like our Savior Christ reached down to offer forgiveness to a woman caught in adultery, to a sinful tax collector named Matthew, even to those who crucified Him with this prayer: “*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do*” (Luke 23:34). This is the depth of the Cross.

Any attempt to measure the Cross of Christ, is an attempt to measure the immeasurable, to come to know that which passes knowledge, to comprehend what is infinitely beyond human comprehension. Yet this is St. Paul’s prayer for us, that through the Cross we may come to know the love of Christ, and so we survey the wondrous Cross, we measure it, and in doing so we learn something about God, and our value to Him, that only the Cross of Christ can teach us. Only the Cross, and the Son of God dying on it, painfully and personally reveal the height and depth and breadth and length of God’s unfailing love. Survey the wondrous Cross, take some time to consider the Son of God dying on it, and you will never again doubt the extent of God’s love for you.