

In 1962, the preeminent Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, toured the United States, delivering lectures to packed halls across the country. Barth's influence on modern theology is difficult to overstate. His monumental project titled *The Church Dogmatics* stretched across 13 volumes and contained more than six million words. And that only represents a portion of his prolific output. His writings reshaped the landscape of Christian thought in the 20th century.

Well, during one of those visits in 1962, a student stood up, struck by the weight of Barth's intellectual legacy, and asked him this question: "Dr. Barth, could you summarize your entire theology in a single sentence?" After a moment, Barth responded, "Yes, I can. In the words of a song I learned at my mother's knee, Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so." Millions and millions of words, thousands of pages of doctrines defined, lectures given, scriptures meditated on, how could you summarize it all in one sentence? Barth brings it back to that profound and yet simple truth. Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so.

One of the vocational regularities of my job is how frequently I get to experience firsthand people who respond to a similar type of question. It's a different form and different circumstances. It isn't asked as clearly as it was to Barth, nor do the examples that I'm thinking of come across as rationally laid out as his response was, but instead, I get to experience the off-the-cuff response of how people articulate their view of God. It generally goes something like this.

I meet someone new, and we begin to shoot the breeze about the weather, about whatever, and our history. Inevitably, it comes to the question of what do you do for a living? To which I respond. "I'm a pastor of a local church." Typically, the response may be something along the lines of, "Oh, wow, I could never step foot on the property of a church. I'd fear the whole place would catch on fire." Or "I would just ignite into flames if I were to come into contact with this God."

Who is this Jesus that has such a magnetic field for some people, and a stumbling block for others? Who is this obscure Nazarene who evokes such broad emotions? From Barth writing millions of words on the love of God to others, who just off the cuff assume God hates them or is out to get them. Who is this itinerant preacher from Galilee in whose name reforms and revivals and renewals were spurred, where libraries were filled with

brilliant scholarship and rich reflection? Who is this Jesus, who evokes such passionate, intimate, and emotional responses from people?

It's the way of normal life that when a person dies, their influence on history recedes rather dramatically. But it's Jesus' death that inverted this human trajectory. Jesus' impact was greater a hundred years after his death than it was during his life. It was greater still after 500 years and greater still 2000 years after his death. What is it about this Jesus, to whom we gather with millions across the globe on a morning like today to worship, to declare he is Lord?

Jesus' love came down. That's the name of this sermon series that we are in, and it's an exploration, a meditation on some of those questions of who Jesus is. We're not just trying to rely on our own conceptions of who Jesus is, but rather we're going back to the scriptures to see the ways in which Jesus defined himself and how some of those early followers of Jesus reflect on who Jesus is. We're anchoring the whole series in that phrase from the Apostle John that we looked at last week, simply that God is love. Love came down.

We're in this season of Advent, which is the season where we anticipate; we wait. We long for that which is to come. Now, depending on how you resonate with that phrase, God is love. That will determine whether Advent is a season of joy or a bit of anguish. Whether it's good news for you or not that love came down really depends on how you experience that image of God.

Last week, I prompted us with that question by Tozer. "What comes into your mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you." If, when you think of God, you have negative images associated with the identity of God, then love came down is something not to be joyfully embraced, but something to be avoided. Or if you, like Dr. Barth, were able to summarize that song he learned on his mother's knee, Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so, you'll have a different experience of this concept of love that came down.

Who do you conceive Jesus to be? What stirs in your heart and your soul when you come into a church like this on the second week of Advent, and we proclaim something like, what a powerful name it is. What is stirred within your heart? Many of us carry a sense that God has conditional love. I hope that you come to experience this morning what I'm calling the inseparability of

God's love because God is love. There is nothing you can do that can separate you from that love.

Yet we all seem to carry a lurking suspicion that God is disappointed in us. That God's judgment hangs over us, that God is against us or apart from us, or maybe even just apathetic to us. Some of you walk into a room like this and think, "Well, Jesus probably tolerates me," or maybe "God is just shaking his head at me again. How dare you walk into my house," or others carry an image of "I'm just one failure away from God being totally, completely done with me." Others of us have an image of God as a defined scorekeeper. Others assume God is entirely absent or easily disappointed. We may never vocalize these images, but they sit deep beneath the surface of our being. We know the right things to say, and yet at our core, we are living not from the place that God is love, but he is something else.

Well, if that is you this morning, I have gospel news for you. This morning, we're going to look at Romans 8. We're picking up in one of the most dense, beautiful letters of all of the New Testament. It's Paul who is writing to the church in Rome, and he, too, is doing some of the work that I'm attempting to, albeit he's doing it much better. But he is writing to correct these negative images that we associate with God. To bring clarity to what we call the gospel.

So we pick up in Romans 8, right about the halfway point, where it's not just in numerical order, but even in his argument, an inflection point. We arrive at Romans 8:31: *"What then shall we say in response to these things?"* Now we stop there because we're picking up partway through. If you've read Romans before, you'll have a taste of what these things are, but you should be asking what exactly these things are that Paul is talking about.

Before we go on, I just want to briefly summarize chapters 5 to 8. Paul's message, at its core, is the overwhelming grace of God. In some ways, I want you to receive this. I want you to know how much Paul is reemphasizing this from Romans 5 to Romans 8.

In **chapter 5:1**, Paul says that we have been justified through faith. A little bit further in **chapter 5:8**, he says, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. **Chapter 5:10**, we were reconciled to him through the death of God's Son. **Chapter 6:4**, we were buried and raised with Christ. **Chapter 6:14**, sin is no longer your master for those in Christ. **Chapter 6:23**, the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus. **Chapter 7:25**, God delivers us through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Chapter 8:1**, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. **Chapter 8:15**, you have been adopted into the family of God. **Chapter 8:18**, God's glory will be revealed to us. **Chapter 8:26**, the Spirit helps us in our weakness and is interceding on our behalf. **Chapter 8:28**, God is working for the good in your life, no matter the circumstances. **Chapter 8:30**, we've been called justified and will be glorified in and through Christ.

See, when Paul asks what we are to say to all of these things, those are the things that he has in mind. What do we do with this immense amount of the grace of God that he has just poured through this letter up until this point? He asks how we can summarize all of that? And Paul will summarize it in ten words. It might be the most profound ten words in all of the scriptures.

Look back at verse 31. *"What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?"* Thousands and thousands of words of theology, and Paul summarized it by saying God is for you. This is one of those things that you know in your head, you walk in with that knowledge, but might I warn us that Paul wants us to know not just in our heads, but in our guts, similar to the prayer we looked at in Ephesians last week.

We must pray for the power of God so that we can know God's love, which surpasses knowledge, just this reality that God is for us and not against us. Church, this needs to reside in our gut, in our core. This is where we live. How you respond to a statement like that, whether you believe God is for you or not, will shape the way you pray. It will shape the way you go throughout your work. It will shape the way that you experience all of life. What you believe when you think about God is the most important thing about you, because it will direct the path of your life.

But notice here that when Paul says God is for us, then who can be against us, note that he doesn't mean that things won't try to come against us. We'll experience things coming against us. Certainly, we will experience forces that feel like they are against us. Injustice will come against us. The evil one will come against us. Angry, resentful people can come against us. Powers and principalities can come against us. But Paul is reminding us that while those forces may impose themselves on you, may we never forget that God is for us.

He doesn't just want us to name that. He wants to articulate why. He wants to make a case for that. So look down in verse 32. Paul continues to make the case as to why he knows God is for us. *"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"*

What Paul is doing is what you could call a lesser-to-greater argument. He's saying to look at the reality we're living in. God gave his only Son, and so if he gave his Son over to death for our sake, well then, how could he not be for us? If he gave something as great as that, of course, that communicates that God is for us.

If God has given you all things, you have no reason to wonder if his love is true. If God is willing to sacrifice his Son, you don't have to worry in any capacity. If God is committed to your well-being, he desires your good. He's longing for your good, and even more than that, he is working towards your good and has worked towards your good. Paul says that how could we possibly question that?

But he wants to give another metaphor, because I'm imagining that you may still be skeptical of this. Okay, he gave his Son, but isn't that what God's supposed to do? Isn't God love? Well, he draws another explanation of it. Look at verse 33. Now he takes it from that lesser to greater example and brings it into a courtroom scene in which he's trying to unpack this more.

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. vv. 33-34

Paul brings us into this courtroom scene and says, "Hey, you may be there, and you may say that in my head, I know God is love, but there are accusations that come against me." He says there are things in which God or people have said things about me or I say things about myself, and he says, who can bring any charge against you? He says it is God who justifies. He says, who then is the one who condemns? No one. Because God in Jesus is at the right hand interceding for us.

When you feel those feelings of condemnation and hear the words of the adversary, the evil one, who's saying how much you've messed up, God couldn't possibly love you. Jesus says that it is covered in his blood. When you feel the weight of addiction and feel tempted to give in to that defeatism, Jesus says, that is covered in my blood. When you feel the weight of failure, Jesus says, that's covered in my blood. When you're caught in habitual sin, Jesus says, that's covered in my blood. When you are a failure and you are inconsistent, Jesus says, that's covered in my blood. When you have a bad temper, and you're angry, and your addiction flares up, and betrayal takes place, all of it is covered in the blood of Jesus.

Paul says, how could you imagine God is not for you? Because Jesus is right there interceding, declaring that it has been covered. It is a stunning visual that ultimately culminates when we get to verse 35, where Paul is continuing to play these rhetorical questions.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. vv. 35-37

Paul is reflecting on all of this and trying to communicate it to that church. He's saying: can trouble or hardship, or the circumstances around you, separate you? Nothing can. Persecution or famine or whatever the pain that you're experiencing cannot separate you. Nothing can. Nakedness or danger or sword. Nothing can separate you from the love of God. And this is regardless of your felt experience.

We can feel like God is distant, but as the psalmist would write in Psalm 23, "*Even though I walked through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me.*" One of the important reasons we gather as a community week after week is when you are in that valley, when you don't feel the love of God, you need the voices of your brothers and sisters in this room who will declare those things that you can't possibly believe are true in that moment, and yet they are. Nothing can separate you from the love of God. And then he arrives at verse 38, and you can almost sense it in his voice. It's like he just erupts in worship, and he writes,

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. vv. 38-39

You are not just tolerated by God; you are loved. You are not just forgiven; you are loved. You are not just liked; you are loved. You are not just put up with; you are loved. Neither death, life, angels, demons, present, future powers, height, depth, anything. And I love that he adds that just to make sure he covers his basis. Nothing in all of creation can separate you from the love of God.

Advent is the reminder, the waiting anticipation of the incarnation of God, meaning God showing up in the form of Jesus, which means he is the visible representation of the invisible God. So what we see in Jesus is what we know is most true of God. It's how we understand the love of God because Jesus and God are one and the same. We talked about that Trinity last week, and that relationship between Jesus and the Father is what exudes love. It pours out of love. That's the Spirit of God. That's the essence. The air, the aroma around the triune God is love.

So when we encounter God, or when we, in Advent, anticipate and wait for that God, we remember that he came, he poured himself out. Poured all of his divinity out for the sake of descending and coming into this world so that you and I can be reminded of that which is most true about us, that we are beloved by the God of the universe.

This reminds me of a story in John 4 where we see this play out well. The story takes place in the heat of the day, and Jesus is walking alone, and it says that he got tired. So he pulled over to this well and sat down to rest. At this time, most of the people who would draw from a well came earlier in the morning; they wouldn't want to go out under the oppressive sun. So the well was empty. It was just Jesus there. But then he looks off into the distance and sees a woman approaching.

Now, what we need to know about this woman is that he's somewhere in Samaria, and so it's a Samaritan woman, and you may or may not know that the Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. They would never associate with one another. Let

alone would a Samaritan woman approach a Jewish man. That would've been culturally taboo in ways we can't imagine.

So Jesus is resting by this well, and off in the distance, he sees this woman approaching, which would've been odd. Why is she coming in the middle of the day? Our best guess is she probably had just grown tired of the whispers about her. She was probably tired of the sideways glances, tired of being a story on other people's lips. So she comes when her shame feels safer than the company that would be there. She comes with a bucket in her hand, her head down, and her heart guarded.

What Jesus knew and what we come to find out is that her life had been a long story of almost five broken marriages, likely the result of some mix of injustice and her own shared failure. Now she's living with a man who is not even calling her wife. She's learned not to expect much from God nor from men. And certainly, she has learned not to expect love from them. So Jesus is at this well, and this woman approaches filled with shame, filled with guilt, and Jesus makes a simple request. "Will you give me a drink of water?"

I would imagine with this woman, there's a mix of fear and uncertainty, and maybe even a flicker of faint hope. She catches her breath. He's not avoiding her as everyone else has done. He's engaging with her, coming closer to her, and so she just protests. "How can you ask me for a drink? Don't you know I'm a Samaritan woman?" And all that shame that is buried deep in her soul comes to the surface, but Jesus doesn't flinch.

In response, Jesus looks her in the eye in a way that almost seems invasive, I would think. Because in some way, she must have understood that this is Jesus, and he knows everything about my story. So he begins to tell her that he is here to give something that he calls Living Water. Water that can reach the deep places, the recesses of your heart. He said that this water at the well can't fill something deeper, the thing she was longing for. He said that he was offering water that could.

The woman did what a good Christian does: she tries to hide behind religion. She said that they don't worship here. Don't they worship over there? She tries to hide behind this facade, but Jesus goes right to the place where she has walled off to everyone and says, "Could you call your husband?" And the woman responds, "I don't have a husband." Then a gentle pause without condemnation, Jesus says, "I know. You've had five husbands, and the one you're with isn't currently your husband."

Jesus names her whole story. The man she is with right now isn't her husband. She has a littered past. He names her story, all of it, and for the first time in years, she can no longer hide. What we read in the story that follows is that she no longer wants to hide because Jesus encountered her in her pain, in her shame, in her guilt, and didn't discard her. He held her with dignity. It is in her shame that he shows up. It's in her isolation that he draws

near. It's in her doubt that he offers himself. I am convinced that nothing can separate you from the love of God, nothing.

It was about 20 years ago now. I found myself in a similar situation to that of the woman at the well. It was a late afternoon, and I was in my car, in my college's parking lot, tears streaming down my face, the questions, the doubts, the certainty that my life had just come unraveled. All of it hadn't stopped flooding my consciousness for a few hours.

For years, I'd been on this trajectory towards a life of ministry. I had been the youth group star, aspiring Bible school student, ministry-driven young person, who had allowed all of it to flood my ego and enable me to assume that I was some holier-than-thou gift to the world. But there that afternoon, I was no longer riding high. I was living in the reality that I had suppressed the broken mess I had made of life.

See, all of that had come to the surface just a few days earlier. The facade that I had projected had caught up to me as hidden sin in my life became no longer hidden. It became public. And all those years, and in my haste to project the holy veneer, the image I wanted to project had destroyed friendships along the way. I just assumed that if I could make them look worse, maybe that'll make me look better. And in my insecurity and brokenness, I destroyed friendships that to this day are still broken.

I sat there and realized I am not who I want to be, nor am I who I project myself to be. See this insecurity that I had manifested, it had ruined so much, left a wake of brokenness beside me, and all of it came crashing down when I was sitting in my car that afternoon; my shame exposed, my friend's gone.

I resonate with this woman because I, too, was using religion, was using my relationship with God to hide all of that brokenness within me. Shame exposed, friends gone. I was sitting in the parking lot of my Christian college, trying to hold onto some perspective of who I was supposed to be. And I didn't know what to do.

I remembered one of my professors earlier that year saying that the Psalms give us language for all human experience. I didn't know what to do. I felt utterly broken. I assumed God was angry and furious with me. I said, "Well, let's just try the Psalms." I flopped my Bible open right to Psalm 2. The first verse I read, verse 7, says, "*I will proclaim the Lord's decree: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have become your father.'*"

It was in that moment that I began to be convinced that there's nothing that can separate us from the love of God. I don't know where you're at with the Lord. I don't know what it is you're experiencing, but that was a moment like that woman at the well, an inflection point, in which I, for the first time in my Christian life, had awakened, even though I had been born in the back pew of a church.

I experienced the love of God. I experienced not shame, not regret, not guilt, not punishment, but when I finally allowed the bottom of my life to drop out and come before the Father, what I was met with was who God has always been, love. "You are my son, and today I am your Father." There is nothing, Church, that can separate you from the love of God.

It's the woman at the well, filled with shame and guilt. And what she found is love. It's Paul, the self-defined chief among sinners, knocked over by the presence of God on the way to Damascus, confronted with all he had done. And what he finds is the God of the universe encountering him with love. It's author Brennan Manning, in which I based much of this series off his work, who was a lifelong alcoholic and yet a world-renowned speaker, constantly struggling with this tension. In his book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, which is a beautiful read, he wrote,

When I get honest, I admit I am a bundle of paradoxes. I believe and I doubt, I hope and get discouraged, I love and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty about not feeling guilty. I'm trusting and suspicious. I'm honest and I still play games...To live by grace means to acknowledge my whole life story, the light side and the dark. In admitting my shadow side, I learn who I am and what God's grace means...My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it... Grace calls out. You are not just a disillusioned old man who may die soon, or a middle-aged woman stuck in a job and desperately wanting to get out, or a young person feeling the fire in the belly begin to grow cold. You may be insecure, inadequate, mistaken, or potbellied. Death, panic, depression, and disillusionment may be near you. But you are not just that. You are accepted. Never confuse your perception of yourself with the mystery that you are really accepted. Brennan Manning

Whatever our failures are, whatever mess you carry, whatever mistakes you've made in life, whatever guilt that is buried within you, whatever shame you hold. None of that hinders the love of God from flowing from his being into you. Jesus loves you as you are, not as you should be, because no one is as they should be. We are equally privileged, but unentitled beggars at the door of God's mercy. No matter how far you perceive yourself to be, no matter how long you perceive yourself to have been away, no matter what obstacle you've constructed that you assume has separated you from the God of love, it hasn't.

Imagine with me for a moment, I've told lots of stories, but I want you to think of a story. Imagine for a moment that Jesus appeared at your house tonight, knocking on the door. You open the door, and he asks to come in and eat with you. And in this scenario, like the woman at the well, he's showing up with knowledge of everything you are and everything you are not. A total comprehension of your life story. Every skeleton hidden in

your closet. Imagine he knows every thought, every action, and inaction. Imagine he laid out the real state of your present discipleship, your hidden agenda, the mixed motives, the dark desires buried in your psyche. Imagine he knows every part of your life that is unknown to everyone else because you've been hiding it.

Imagine he sits down at that table. What do you feel right now? What do you experience? What comes to mind? Is it fear? Is it shame? Is this something you want to squirm from? Of course, you know where I'm going with this. Whether you feel it or not, what is coming towards you at that imaginary table is love. It is love. "I have come to offer Living Water." It's, "You are my son or daughter, and I'm your father." It's Paul saying that nothing can separate you from the love of God.

For years, we carry around buried in our body, beneath the surface of what we know the right answer to be, a belief that functions that if God loved us, it's only because we behaved or because we were loving, or because we held our life in order. Here's the problem. We center our understanding of God's love, not based on who he is, but on how we perform. Paul says, who can condemn? No one. It's God who justifies. The center of the action is not you and me. It is God who is love and whose love is pouring out toward you.

I opened my sermon with the words of that Swiss theologian, Karl Barth. Millions and millions of words of theology written, and yet it all boils down to: Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so.

In 1964, another type of theologian, if you will, a children's author and illustrator, Shel Silverstein, wrote a story that has carried an indelible mark on those who've encountered it. To my knowledge, Silverstein wasn't a Christian. I believe he was Jewish, and the story was not necessarily intended to be a depiction of God's love, but this parable carries strong and well, so I want to read it. I want you to experience it as a parable of the love of God. The story of *The Giving Tree* goes like this.

Once there was a tree and she loved a little boy. And every day the boy would come and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest. He would climb on her trunk and swing from her branches and eat apples. And they would play hide-and-go-seek. And when he was tired, he would sleep in her shade. And the boy loved the tree very much. And the tree was happy. But time went by. And the boy grew older. And the tree was often alone. Then one day the boy came to the tree and the tree said,

"Come, Boy, come and climb up my trunk swing from my branches and eat apples and play in my shade and be happy."

"I am too big to climb and play," said the boy. "I want to buy things and have fun. I want some money. Can you give me money?"

"I'm sorry," said the tree, "but I have no money. I have only leaves and apples. Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy."

And so the boy climbed up the tree and gathered her apples and carried them away. And the tree was happy. But the boy stayed away for a long time and the tree was sad. And then one day the boy came back and the tree shook with joy and she said, "Come, Boy, climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and be happy."

"I am too busy to climb trees," said the boy. "I want a house to keep me warm," he said. "I want a wife and I want children, and so I need a house. Can you give me a house?"

"I have no house," said the tree. "The forest is my house, but you may cut off my branches and build a house. Then you will be happy."

And so the boy cut off her branches and carried them away to build his house. And the tree was happy. But the boy stayed away for a long time. And when he came back, the tree was so happy she could hardly speak. "Come, Boy," she whispered, "come and play."

"I'm too old and sad to play," said the boy. "I want a boat that will take me far away from here. Can you give me a boat?"

"Cut down the trunk and make a boat," said the tree. "Then you can sail away and be happy." And so the boy cut down her trunk and made a boat and sailed away. And the tree was happy, but not really. And after a long time the boy came back again. "I am sorry, Boy," said the tree, but I have nothing left to give you—My apples are gone."

"My teeth are too weak for apples," said the boy.

"My branches are gone," said the tree, "You cannot swing on them—"

"I'm too old to swing on branches," said the boy.

"My trunk is gone," said the tree. "You cannot climb—"

"I'm too tired to climb," said the boy.

"I am sorry," sighed the tree. "I wish that I could give you something...but I have nothing left. I'm just an old stump. I am sorry."

"I don't need very much now," said the boy, "just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired."

"Well," said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could, "well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down

and rest." And the boy did. And the tree was happy.
The End.

I don't know where you're at with Jesus. I don't know where you're at coming into this Advent, but I do know you're here. I don't have to wonder if the tree is happy that you're here. The invitation is to sit on that stump and rest. For I'm convinced that neither height nor depth, nor angels, nor demons, nor the present, nor the future, nor anything in all of creation can separate you from the love of God. May you, this Advent, pull up a seat on that stump and rest in the presence of the loving God.