

Photos of the Faith – A Measuring Cup

Ephesians 3:14-21

Introduction

The 2021 Olympics, hosted by Tokyo, began this past weekend. Athletes come from all over the world with the hope of being the one who will set a new world record. A lot of dreams will be fulfill and dashed in these next several days.

The logistics behind an event like that intrigue me just as much as the event itself does. So as I was reading about all of the preparation required, I found an article that made this observation:

The Olympic Games are one of the greatest international stages in the world, with the best athletes coming together for feats of skill, strength and endurance. But medal winners rely on more than just ability. A precise system of measurements, distances and timing is required to maintain the integrity of the competition. Before the games even begin, meticulous care is given to the accuracy of measurements to ensure that athletes compete on a level playing field.

Since times and distances achieved in Olympic events are compared to those of past Olympians, measurements are crucial. For example, every four years a different city and country host the games; thus, a different swimming pool and track and more must be provided each time. The ability to consistently reproduce a pool length exactly 50 meters (not 50.01 or 49.99) or a track 400 meters long (not 400.01 or 399.99) may not appear to be significant. However, when you consider that additional length equals extra time and that some races are won by one-thousandth of a second, it becomes clear that precise measurements are a big deal.

I like that last sentence: Precise measurements are a big deal.

Measurements are a big deal in the passage in Ephesians that has our focus today as well. We are in week three of our series titled "Photos of the Faith." Each week we are capturing an image from the lectionary texts.

- In week 1, our photo was of a "plumb line." We saw that God is calling us to live a life that is to the "praise of His glory!"
- Last week, our photo was a brick. We rejoiced as we saw that God breaks down the walls that keep us from Him, and uses those bricks – uses the flaws and failures of our lives – to build a sanctuary of praise.

Today our image is a measuring cup. Precise measurements are a big deal, remember! The Tokyo Olympics will measure time and distance, runs and goals, degrees of difficulty and much more. So what gets measured in today's text? Two things:

MEASUREMENT #1: GOD'S CAPACITY TO LOVE

Look at verses 17b-19. Paul writes:

I pray that you ...may have power... to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ... that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:17b-19)

As I reflect on this text, two images come to my mind:

The first image is a box of cereal. Have you ever opened a new box of Cheerios only to discover that the box is in reality only half-full? If you complain about it, you will be directed to the small print on the label: "Some settling of contents may occur during shipping." That's image #1.

The second is a bowl of ice cream. Did you know that you are never too full for ice cream? It's one of the many things I learned when I got married. Somehow you can be completely stuffed from a Thanksgiving dinner, unable to down another bite. But you can still consume an entire bowl of ice cream. I'm told by the ice cream eating experts in my extended family that ice cream oozes into the cracks and crevices of your stomach, circling the turkey and noodles but not actually adding to the volume of what is already there. Ice cream fills in the gaps so that when you say you are full, you are full indeed.

Now, here is a theological truth I guarantee you will never hear in any other sermon: God's love is not like a box of Cheerios. It's like a big bowl of ice cream.

When God pours out His love on you, there is no settling of contents during shipment. When God gives you His love, you don't end up with a half-empty container.

No! When God fills you up with His love. And then He continues to pour in a more and more until it oozes its way into every crack and crevice. When God loves you, He fills you up. Completely. You are filled, the text says, to the full measure of all the fullness of God. There is not an ounce, not a molecule that goes unloved.

The great early church Father Jerome used the imagery of the cross as the ultimate symbol of God's love for us. It:

- Reaches up to include all who are in heaven
- Reaches down to love even those who are in hell
- Reaches to one side to extend to all who are living in faith
- Reaches to the other side to include those who are wandering away

No person living or dead is beyond the love of God. Each person is fully and completely loved by God. One of Selah's contemporary worship songs expresses the awesomeness of this truth very simply:

How deep the Father's love for us?
How vast beyond all measure?

That He should give His only Son
To make this wretch His treasure

Can I tell you something? God cannot love you anymore than He already does. And He will never love you less.

- You are full.
- You have been measured and all the cracks and crevices are filled in.
 - All the secret places – those places that embarrass you, that haunt you, that humiliate you ... The love of God has already filled those places.

His capacity to love has been measured, and it is deep and wide, high and low. It is filled to the fullness.

There is a second measurement taken in this text ...

#2: OUR CAPACITY TO ASK AND IMAGINE

I love verses 20-21:

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine ...
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations...
(Ephesians 3:20-21)

Watch how this works!

- In the Old Testament reading, the servant of Elisha needed to feed 100 hungry men, but he only had 20 loaves of bread in the pantry.
- In the Gospel reading, the disciples of Jesus faced a far greater challenge. They had 5,000 hungry men PLUS women and children, and only had a little boy's Snackable lunch with which to work.

In each of these stories God didn't just meet the need. He didn't merely feed the 100 or the 5000. He fed them, yes! Their tummies were full, yes! But when he did it, there were leftovers to put in the fridge for another day.

And the pattern continues throughout all Scripture and throughout all time:

- God takes a 99-year old man named Abraham, a man who wants desperately to be a dad ... a man who believes he is well past his prime. And then God makes this man the father of many nations.
- God takes a murderer and failure named Moses, a man who was only trying to help but now hides in shame as an anonymous sheepherder in the desert far away from his home, and God transforms this man into the one of the greatest leaders of the Jewish nation.

God hears the cries of His people, and then He responds with immeasurably more. How awesome is that?

One commentator said it like this:

“Open your mouth as wide as you can. God will fill it and have plenty more to give.”

You and I cannot measure what God can do, wants to do, and will do – that part is immeasurable. The text says that clearly. No God does “immeasurably more.” It makes no difference how big of a measuring cup you bring. You can't capture all God will do.

But we can measure our capacity to ask or imagine. That's pretty easy. Why? Because it is nowhere as big as the thing God wants to do in our lives. Do you see it?

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine ...
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations...
(Ephesians 3:20-21)

You know, more and more these days I find myself feeling guilty about the things for which I pray. Not that I am praying for wrong things, but that my prayers are puny compared to what God wants to do in and through me. I find myself wondering if God is thinking “For goodness sake, Tom, ask me for something big! Don't you know I created the world in seven days just by speaking it into existence? Now here you are you are asking for Me peanuts!”

I get convicted by blog posts like this one ...

I'm in a friend's living room, surrounded by my small group. The time comes for us to pray for each other. What will I ask for? We go around the room: traveling mercies, health for somebody's aunt, help finding a new job, and more traveling mercies. But something is missing. There are weightier matters to attend to. If we pray only for health and safety, we're missing out on something big.

I don't want to do that. I don't want to be a person whose prayerful imaginations can be captured in the smallest measuring cup.

How about you? What's the biggest item on your prayer list? Stretch your imagination. God can do immeasurably more than even that!

APPLICATION

You know, at first glance these two measurements seem to be two separate items. But truthfully there is an important connect there. It is because God loves us that He gives us immeasurably more. His giving happens because of His love.

In the story of the woman at the well – the story that is the inspiration behind the current Adult Sunday School class – we are introduced to an ostracized woman whose only thoughts were to get her daily bucket of water and get back to town before the other

women of the area came. She was tired of them looking down on her because of her lifestyle. To this woman who wanted only water, Jesus makes the following comment:

If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. (John 4:10)

You and I, as followers of Jesus, do know the gift of God and we do know who is standing before us. Let us be bold in our asking, not because we are deserving, but because He is loving.

Amen.