

# Uncalculating Love

Kenneth E. Kovacs

*Fourth Sunday After Pentecost*

*Pride Sunday*

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## Scripture

### **Psalm 139:1-18**

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.  
You search out my path and my lying down  
and are acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before a word is on my tongue,  
O Lord, you know it completely.  
You hem me in, behind and before,  
and lay your hand upon me.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and night wraps itself around me,"  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.  
My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.  
In your book were written  
all the days that were formed for me,  
when none of them as yet existed.  
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!

How vast is the sum of them!  
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;  
I come to the end—I am still with you.

**Luke 24:1-13**

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him.” Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

## Sermon

At the end of his life, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1965), one of the great minds of the church, reflected on his life/s work. He’s best known for his multi-volume summation of Reformed theology, his magnum opus, *Church Dogmatics*; it’s thousands of pages long, written between 1932 and 1967 and left unfinished when he died. He builds his theological system starting with Jesus Christ and then fills out everything else from him. Reflecting on his work, Barth said if he did it over again—he would get a good editor. Actually, no, he didn’t say that. Tough I think he could have used a good editor.

What Barth did say was that if he did it over again, he would start not with Christology but with *Pneumatology*, that is, with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. [1] Barth suggests that there will come a time, an Age of the Spirit when the church really need to be guided by a theology of the Holy Spirit. [2]

I believe we are living in such an age and that the turbulent times we’re facing might have less to do with the fact that the church has lost its way (as some suspect) and more to do with the fact that the Holy Spirit is shaking our foundations, *forcing* us to get off our butts and *move* where Christ wants to take us, enticing us to give up old patterns of knowing, old ways of being and opening us up for something radically new, creative, and bold. I’m *not* talking about a free-wheeling movement where anything goes, but an understanding of the Holy Spirit firmly grounded, connected, and committed to the implications of Christ’s resurrection in the world today. [3]

The Spirit of the Risen Christ is alive within the universe, an “incredibly benevolent force,” as I suggested last week. [4] The Spirit is working deeper than the defenses of the human ego, yearning, struggling, groaning to realize something within us that we could never achieve nor imagine on our own, as I tried to suggest on Pentecost. And it should not be surprising that the same Spirit who searches the depths of God’s own nature (1 Cor. 2:10), a God who reveals the depths of love through the power of resurrection, would be at work in the world in ways that are startling, disturbing, conflict-producing, and even chaotic.

When Cleopas and his friend encountered Jesus on the Emmaus Road, grief, confusion, and enormous sadness enveloped them. Jesus’ crucifixion threw them into a conflict of immense proportions; it shattered their hopes and dreams and left them with existential shock. [5] We might think the resurrected Jesus, once they recognized him, resolved this conflict for all and made everything better. Sure, their hearts burned within them, and they ran enthusiastically back to Jerusalem (probably at night). But do you think they returned to life as normal? For what is “normal” after you’ve encountered resurrected death? The resurrection turns everything upside down and inside out. It’s a shattering experience. When the Resurrected One encounters us on the road of life, we’re thrown into a new conflict of immense proportions. It threw them into crisis and chaos. It’s the end of the world as we know it, and it marks the beginning of something radically new. Everything changes. Their knowledge of the world, their understanding of themselves, and their knowledge of God all had to *yield* to the higher knowledge offered in that moment of radical insight. What they had previously assumed, and thought was sure and steadfast was utterly undone. God had done a radically new thing.

Once they realize what God had done, Jesus vanishes and moves on. There’s one verse in this story that always tugs on me: “As they came near the village to which they were going, [Jesus] walked ahead as if he were going on” (Lk. 24:28). Walked ahead as if he were going on. While it is true that Jesus walks with us, it’s also good to remember that he’s always ahead of

us, with his sights on the future. Sure, he will sit and share a meal, open the pages of scripture for us, and offer us fellowship, but Jesus never stays in one place. He calls us and takes us along *his* road; he *moves* us toward a new horizon, that far country, the realm of God’s justice, into what scripture calls “that day,” that New Day.

It’s this sense of movement which Jesus offers that I’ve been stressing these past couple of weeks. The Spirit takes up this movement *for* Christ. The Holy Spirit is moving – powerfully – with resurrection power in the church and world today. I believe the Spirit is extending the work of Christ, unfolding and fulfilling what began with the resurrection. The Spirit is kinetic, flowing with the pulse and rhythm of God. The Spirit is infinitely swift, blowing where she will. The Spirit cannot be managed, controlled, tamed, or constrained by the human spirit. And it’s important to remember that the Holy Spirit is not exclusively in service to the church—or at least not in service to *our* understanding or vision, or image of what the church is or should be. The Holy Spirit is in service to the *Word* (that is, Christ), who, through the Spirit, continues the work of Christ with resurrection power, enfleshing human life with the Spirit of God in the church, but also out in the streets of the city, in the *world*. And Christ’s vision for the church *far exceeds* our views or opinions about what the church is or should be.

Nearly twenty years ago, I was at a wedding rehearsal dinner for a former church member. After cocktails, we were told to find a seat, for the meal was about to be served. I noticed that the bride’s brother, who lives in New York City, had a male guest with him, Jose, and it was clear that they were together. There was an open seat across from them, so I sat down. We talked about life in Baltimore and New York (I grew up in North Jersey). During a lull in the conversation, Jose looked at me earnestly and said, with fear and trembling, “*Why does God hate me?*” Everyone around us heard the question. Stunned, I replied, “The church might hate you, but God doesn’t.” I don’t know if that answer was from the Holy Spirit, but that’s what I said. At that moment, I felt I needed to separate the voice of God from the malicious statements of the institutional church. Jose moved to New York from Puerto Rico. He was raised a Jehovah’s Witness and was disowned by his family because he’s gay. Then Jose told me about two experiences he had. Jose once said he felt, as he put it, “the hand of God” resting upon his shoulder, offering him assurance as a gay man. Another time he was in the subway, he sensed God’s presence and heard a voice that was not his own say to him, “You’re okay.” The experience overwhelmed him, lasting fifteen minutes. As he shared this with me, beads of sweat ran down his forehead. He was so excited but also nervous. “I was afraid when you sat down across from me,” he said, “because I knew that I had to raise this issue with you.” Jose knew that God didn’t hate him, but he didn’t learn this from the church. The Holy Spirit told him the truth, and he feared me because he didn’t want someone representing the church to tell him otherwise. I told him there are plenty of churches in Manhattan that would welcome him and his partner and celebrate God’s love for them and each other. But I don’t think he believed me.

That was a painful conversation. I was viewed as part of a hateful institution that excludes and condemns. I don’t want to be associated with a denomination that is unclear about God’s radically inclusive love. What he didn’t know, and as I reflect upon that experience, I wish there was a way for me to say that when I said, “The church might hate you, but God doesn’t,” I was trying to assure him from out of my own painful experience as a gay Christian serving a church at that time that was full of hate, that told me that I didn’t belong, a denomination that welcomed my gifts for ordination but not me. I was in a terrible bind because it was too risky to come out and share more with Jose. It would be nearly another ten years before the denomination changed ordination standards and revised the *Book of Order*.

This conversation with Jose was an important reminder to me, then and now, that we cannot ignore the *experience* of countless gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons who have encountered the Resurrected One on the Emmaus Road, who have come to know the love of God and the movement of the Spirit sometimes apart from and despite the witness of the church. Some today argue that theological conviction is more important than experience. Yet, we must remember that experience comes before dogmatic formulation, experience grounds conviction (as it was in the early church). [6] Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964) wisely wrote in one of her letters, “Conviction without experience makes for harshness.” [7] Sometimes, Christians be terribly harsh inflicting dogmatic convictions and ignoring, if not silencing the experience of many siblings who are trying to tell us something of Christ’s love and what the Spirit is doing in their lives.

*My God* – how did we get this way? I *love* the church. But sometimes, we just don’t get it. We’re so busy trying to preserve the institution or denomination or keeps things they way they are, wrestling for control, but at what price? We’re getting in the way of what the Spirit is doing in the world, and what Christ is trying to do through us. As Anne Lamott says, “It’s enough to make Jesus drink gin from the cat dish.” [8]

The Holy Spirit, Barth told us, has no respect for the past or tradition, *per se*, no respect for ecclesial institutions, but only for the redemption of human lives and community. [9] The Spirit of Christ is moving in the world, and the church can either be part of it, caught up in the Spirit’s work, or stand aside. But the Spirit of Christ will not be constrained despite those who push against the Spirit’s movement. Consider the vandalism in recent weeks in the presbytery at Dickey Memorial, Light Street, and Ark and Dove. The resistance is real. We need to be vigilant. Nevertheless, Jesus is out there ahead of us, leading the church forward in the way of God’s radically inclusive love.

*Veni, Creator Spiritus*. “Come, Creator Spirit.” This prayer is an “open surrender to the absolute creativity of God.” [10] When the church trusts in the Spirit’s movement, open to where the Spirit wants to take it, then the church will be free, truly free to be as revolutionary and as radical as we here know the Gospel to be. To live this way liberates the church to be as creative and imaginative as the age demands. And there is no one more creative and imaginative than the Holy Spirit, who continually creates and recreates the world and our lives within it from within the generative power of God’s redeeming love. Then the church will be unshackled – infinitely swift – free to move down whatever road the Spirit wishes to take us!

In one of his prayers, George MacLeod (1895-1991), Presbyterian minister, prophet, and visionary, former moderator of the Church of Scotland, founder of the Iona Community, one of the first to fight for the rights of gays and lesbians in the church, back in the ‘50s and ‘60s, petitions to Christ for help in figuring how to be the church in a changing day. He confesses that we have spent too much time making the “Church an institute,” knowing full well that God wants the church, as he put it, “to be a chaos of uncalculating love.” [11] Talking about chaos might make Presbyterians a little uneasy, given our love of order. I love this image. I wish I could take credit for it. For me, it says it all. *Thanks be to God!*

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*An earlier version of this sermon was preached at the Covenant Network Conference, November 7, 2003, at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C.*



## Sources

- [1] Philip Rosato, *The Spirit As Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981).
- [2] See Hans Hoffman, “How Karl Barth Influenced Me,” Edited by Edwin Lewis, *Theology Today*, 23 (1956): 369.
- [3] John McIntyre, *The Shape of Pneumatology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), p. 671
- [4] Cornelis van der Kooi, *This Incredibly Benevolent Force: The Holy Spirit in Reformed Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 1-2.
- [5] James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1989), pp. 99ff. I am indebted to Loder’s reflections on this text.
- [6] Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), pp. 39ff. See also Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Translated with a new Foreword by Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978). “In Biblical *experience* nothing is less important than experience as such. It is an appointment and a commission, not a goal and a fulfillment; and therefore it is an elementary thing, hardly conscious of itself, and necessitating only minimum of reflection and confession. The prophets and apostles do not *wish* to be what they are; they *have* to be. And therefore they *are*” (69).
- [7] Flannery O’Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O’Connor*, Selected and Edited by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1995), p. 97.
- [8] Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999).
- [9] Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. “The Holy Spirit makes a new heaven and a new earth, and therefore, new men, new families, new relationships, new politics. It has no respect for old traditions simply because they are traditions, for old solemnities simply because they are solemn, for old powers simply because they are powerful. The *Holy Spirit* has respect for truth, for itself. The Holy Spirit establishes the righteousness of heaven in the

midst of the unrighteousness of the earth and will not stop or stay until all that is dead has been brought to life and a new *world* has come into being” (49-50).

[10] Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), p. 245.

[11] George F. MacLeod, *The Whole Earth Shall Cry Glory* (Isle of Iona: Wild Goose Publications, 1985), p. 39. See also Ronald Ferguson, *George MacLeod: Founder of the Iona Community* (London: HarperCollins, 1990).