

## LOVE WINS Without Limits?

Today is a day of celebration, a celebration of Crawley Baptist Church. Today is a day of thanks, thanks that God has helped us in the days that have recently passed. Today is a day of thanks for God's faithfulness over many years, many generations of people who gathered together and called themselves Crawley Baptist Church.

Today is a day for looking back and recognizing God's presence with us, his people, in this particular community of Christians. Today is a day of rejoicing as we remember all that God has done in us, and through us. Today is a day on which we can reflect on the deep and profound truth that God wants to participate with us in his work on earth. Today is a day when we can ponder again the deep and profound truth that we have been invited by God himself, in his great love, to be part of his bigger and better story.

Today is a great day! Today is an important day. Today is an important day because today we commit again to participating with God in his bigger and better story, as best we can and as best we know how, for the next stretch.

Today is an important day because today we look forward in anticipation to all that God can do in and through us. Today is an important day because today we have committed to following God into an unknown future.

Today is an important day because it is both an ending and a beginning.

It is an ending because we said this: By 2020 Crawley Baptist Church will be bursting with life! A pandemic may have messed up our timing – but that vision has come to an end. At the end of that Vision, I encourage you to reflect on that in your life and the life of Crawley Baptist Church.

And, although slightly delayed because of the pandemic, today is a beginning, the beginning of a new Vision. A new Vision that we trust will lead us forward for the next stretch. So, are you ready friends, followers of Christ, who make up CBC?

*A new vision: By 2025 Crawley Baptist Church will love without limits!*

I hope you said: "Wow!" to that vision statement! 'By 2025 Crawley Baptist Church will love without limits!' I hope you would agree that is a powerful

statement. I hope you would agree that it is a challenging statement and I hope that you will join me as we walk towards that Vision over the next few years.

Friends, I have said before, and I say it again now, I will preach only that of which I am convinced. And I am convinced that to love without limits is to live God's greatest dream. That might sound like an extravagant claim, but stay with me for a minute. In one of his letters John tells us that 'God is love.' (1 John 4:16) God is love – and love gives. The relationship God has in himself is love: the love of the Father for the Son; the love of the Son to the Spirit; from the Spirit to the Father.

I love the thought that the best way to describe what God is like in himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is an interweaving dance of love. The nature of love is that it always moves and flows to another. God creates because his love overflows and he cannot help but want to share his love with others. God's greatest dream is for those he created to share in his love. God created because God is love.

The nature of love is to give, and because we are created in his image, we are created to give and receive love as God himself does. Another, beautiful way of saying that, is that God's greatest dream is for the people he created, you and me, to participate in God's love.

Another powerful, mind blowing, challenging way of saying that, is that God's greatest dream is for people, exactly like you and me, to join in the 'dance' of love that is God himself! And when you get caught up in the dance of love you hear God sing to you, "I love you because I love you because I love you," and when you get caught up in the dance of love and hear God sing to you, you begin to sing the song of love to others.

And when we are caught up in the dance of love and his song, and when we dance the dance of love and sing his song of love, we love without limits, we live God's greatest dream!

I have shown this picture before.

It's Andrei Rublev's 15<sup>th</sup> Century painting of the Trinity.



It portrays God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit sitting round a table sharing fellowship together. If you look carefully you will see a rectangle below the cup in the middle of the picture. There is a theory that in this space there was once a mirror. If this is true, then as you looked at the picture you would find yourself in the picture, at the table. It is a beautiful truth that you, yes you, are invited, welcomed to be at the table of God's great love.

Some of us might do well to hear that deep, deep truth again this morning: you, yes you, are welcome at the table of God's greatest love.

Perhaps though, there is another power in this picture. This picture tells the deep and powerful truth that anyone who comes close finds themselves in the picture. It is the beautiful truth that anyone is welcome in God's love. And that is God's greatest dream, that anyone will come to the table of his great love and learn to dance.

Perhaps there is a challenge here for us – and the reason we need a Vision Statement at all. It is wonderfully true that you are invited to participate in the dance of God's love, that you are greatly loved, loved beyond your imagining. It is wonderfully true that you can dance on God's great dance floor. But it is also wonderfully true that everyone who has ever been created is invited to participate in the dance of God's love. This love, this dance, this truth is not just for us!

God's greatest dream is that all people live in his love. God invites us to live in his bigger and better story, and because of that we read this: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but will have eternal life." (John 3:16)

And because of that, we read this. 'Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all I have commanded.' (Mathew 28:19) And friends, here's my conviction and, it seems, our challenge: we do that when we love without limits!

Two weeks ago, I asked the question: "How's your heart?" So, how are you doing? Two weeks ago, I asked you to imagine that Jesus came to live your life, as you do, in all your circumstances, but with his heart. I invited you to reflect on how your life would be different. I can't answer that question for you, but here's what I think might be true for me: I wonder that if Jesus came to live my life with his heart, I would love without limits. I think I can say that confidently because, when Jesus came to dwell among us, when he did live with us, that's what he did. Jesus lived a life of love without limits.

One day on a mountainside Jesus sat down to teach. He began: "Blessed are..." I love the thought that he was looking at those gathered in front of him, the ordinary, down trodden people, people with little hope, and was telling them they were welcome in the kingdom of the heavens. Jesus was saying his kingdom, his love, wasn't just for the religious people all standing round the edge thinking they were 'in' while everyone else was 'out'. He was saying his kingdom, the kingdom of the heavens was different: the kingdom of the heavens was for everyone.

Perhaps another way of saying what Jesus was saying is this, and this gets very challenging: "Blessed are the physically repulsive, those who smell bad, the twisted, the misshapen, deformed. The too big, too little, too loud, the bald, the fat, the old. The flunk outs, drop outs and burned outs; the broke and the broken. The drug addict and the divorced; the HIV positive and the herpes ridden. The brain damaged and the incurably ill; the barren and the pregnant too many times or at the wrong time. The overemployed, the unemployed, the unemployable. The swindled, the shoved aside, the replaced, the lonely, the incompetent, the stupid; the emotionally starved or emotionally dead. The murderers and the child molesters; the brutal and the bigoted; the drug lords

and the pornographers. Those of a different sexual identity or persuasion; the war criminals, the sadist, the terrorist.”

I am guessing that is hard to hear, but God’s greatest dream is for them too. And Jesus lived that truth. He went to those very people and he loved without limit. Jesus went to those on the outside, who had been ostracized, rejected and discarded. He went to the lonely, the poor, the widow, the sick, the lame. He met a woman by a well, a man by a pool, a crowd on a hill, his disciples in a boat, a man up a tree.... and he loved without limits.

Jesus did not say these people were blessed because of their circumstances, or their choices or their actions, or what they’d done. He said they were blessed because God’s great love can meet them wherever they are. He said they were blessed because God’s great love reaches to them always, in everything. He said they were blessed because they could know that they were greatly loved by his Father in heaven. He said they were blessed because his Father loves without limits. And by his life, his death, his resurrection and his ascension, Jesus showed them it was true.

So, here’s the question: ‘How can CBC love without limits?’ How can you love without limits? Well friends, that’s the journey we’re committing to today. Perhaps the answer lies in becoming more like Jesus. That’s what this teaching series ‘Love Wins’ is all about – to encourage us to love like Jesus, to have his heart. Perhaps the answer lies in dwelling in the deep and profound truth of God’s great love for you: to know this love, it’s width and length and height and depth. Perhaps the answer lies in living in the great and magnificent, far bigger and far better story, than the one you see in front of you. Perhaps the answer lies in seeking God as best you know how and following him as best you know how. My best guess is there’s truth in all of that.

I’m wondering, if God were to write us a letter at this time, for us today, I wonder if he might say something like this.

Dear friend, beloved friend,

You have no idea of the joy it brings me to write this letter you. I’ve longed for you to know again how I feel about you, what I think of you and how much I want for you to fully dance on God’s great dance floor. I long for you to be all that you can be, but most of all I long for you to fully love even as you are fully loved.

I want you to know that I have always been looking for you, waiting for you, watching you. I've seen your joys and I've been with you in your pain. I know how hard it is sometimes for you to see me or feel me near, but, beloved, that is the truth. Always.

My heart breaks when I see you wrestle with the things you find so hard: the doubts, the questions, the regrets, the things you wish you could do again, the things you wish had never happened. My heart breaks for you when you doubt yourself, question yourself, in the moments you feel like giving up on yourself.

My heart goes out to those around you when you are not your best self and I want to gather you up when you see what you have done to others because you have not been your best self.

I want you to know that I've given my very best for you because I love you. I long for you to know that you are so precious to me. Yes, you are. I want you to know that I long for you to be your best self and I long for you to grasp that in me, you are your best self.

Beloved, what I want you to grasp is that you are greatly loved. I know the whole story of your life and you are greatly loved. Greatly loved. I would love for you to think about that more than you know. I would love for you understand just how much you are loved. You are loved all the way to the cross...and back!

I want you to know that in all the mess, in all the things you don't understand and don't want to understand, I have made a way, a way for you to dance. I know that you know life is complex and messy, that it is sometimes unfair and unjust and that it is sometimes tragic, but I would love for you know that you can learn to dance in the rain. You can, really you can. Because I am here, you are safe, and you are greatly loved.

My greatest dream is for you to learn to dance: learn to dance in the good times, the times you are able to express your real self, your deepest self. I would love for that. I would love it too that you could learn to dance when it's hard and the going is tough, really tough. And when you are ready to dance, I will be here. Always.

Here's what I want you to know when you find it hard to come to me: all you ever have to be is what I've made you. That's all I want. That's all I need. All I want from you is you. That's all you need to bring to the dance. You. As yourself. No need to wait till you're who you want to be, or who you think you should be, or who you think others want you to be or think you should be. Let me tell you again: all you ever have to be is who I've made you to be.

You think you're not good enough, not spiritual enough, not eloquent enough. You think you've made too many mistakes, or a mistake that is too big, or too bad. You think you don't understand enough, or get it right enough. And let's be really honest between us, you sometimes really do doubt that I have your best interests at heart. Truth is, I'm ok with that because I've made a way. I've given my best for you and my best is enough. More than enough. And I'm not going away because I love you far too much to do that.

I want you to know: you, as you are, right here and right now, in all the circumstances of your life, you are precisely the gift that I want. Yes...you heard me: you, as you are, are the gift that I want.

And here's one last thing: I want you to know the joy of love without limits: to be loved and to love. To receive love and to give love. To experience the width and length and height and depth of my love, that you have the joy of sharing it with others.

I'm keeping the dream alive. So...how about it. You and me...let's dance!

Your loving Father.

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