

JESUS LOVES ME, THIS I KNOW

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If you hang out with academic theologians –

something I'm not going actually recommend to you, but I used to love doing it –

and ask them who THE most important theologian of the 20th Century was,

Swiss theologian Karl Barth will be on everyone's list of the top 3.

He was known all over the world, loved by Protestants and Roman Catholics alike.

He wrote a systematic theology that is over 9,000 pages long.

He was on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1962 when he was 76 years old and on a speaking tour in America, visiting a bunch of universities and seminaries full of young folks who thought he rocked.

After one of those lectures, there was a Q&A session, and a student asked

“Can you sum up your theology in one sentence?”

Remember, this is a scholar who wrote a 9,000 page systematic theology!

He said: *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.”¹

There's no report that Barth went on, but most of us know the next lines:

Sing them with me if you do: *Little ones to him belong, they are weak and he is strong.*

Could it really be that simple? Yes.

I am convinced that the world would change overnight if every person woke up in the morning

convinced that God literally loved them more than life itself.

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

Little ones to him belong, they are weak and he is strong.

At some point, after singing this for a few years, it should dawn on us that all kinds of people sing this song,

and that God just might love all those other little ones – even people we don't like –

every bit as much as God loves us.

Then, with any luck, that incredible day would come when we would see

that it is our weakness, our willful and evil hearts, not our innate superiority of being better than others,

that forces some of God's other little ones to live in fear, poverty, despair, and untimely death.

Yes, the essential, basic, fundamental, elemental weakness of humans

is that not only do we want what we want for ourselves,

but that we believe that we are JUSTIFIED in using and abusing others to get it.

It began with Cain, who killed his brother Abel because

Cain wanted God to approve of his offering of grain instead of Abel's offering of sheep.

Eliminate Abel and his sheep, and God would HAVE to approve of Cain and his grain.

Cain's plan did not work at all, but you'd never know it by looking at humanity now.

We keep doing it. We keep using and abusing other people

to get what we want for ourselves, in the process readily consigning God's other little ones

to lives of fear, poverty, despair and untimely death.

The most insidious thing is when we wrap this justification up in religious language

arrogating to ourselves the ability to speak on behalf of God almighty.

Jesus came so that God could speak for himself. So let's start with this.

Almighty, omnipotent God, creator of all things, who exists in omnipotent majesty

in the astonishing glory of eternal life, in the fullness of the Reign of Heaven,

collected a set of commonplace atoms and coalesced this tremendous, awesome divinity

into a tiny baby born to a homeless, single peasant woman.

¹ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/01/did-karl-barth-really-say-jesus-loves-me-this-i-know/>

Today's Collect and Scripture readings are at the end of the sermon text.

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This baby almost immediately became a refugee from political violence, founding safe haven in another country for a while.

He came back to Israel and grew to an adult, but was not part of the powerful, privileged class. When this adult, this Jesus of Nazareth, God with skin on, began speaking to others about the Reign of Heaven, he did so while hanging out with all the wrong people: peasants, tax collectors, lepers, women with a history, sick people, hungry folks, poor widows, foreigners and children.

He taught them, healed them, fed them, and encouraged them. He brought abundance and welcome to them.

He did sometimes speak with the privileged and powerful, but they often found themselves on the other side of Jesus – the side that had no problem highlighting their hypocrisy (which boils down to: do as I say, not as I do), calling out their rudeness, callousness, and systems of privilege that took advantage of the poor and those with no social power.

This is how God spoke to humanity when he walked the earth: with his actions. Jesus was God's love in action: Love that does what is best for the other, both by healing and restoring, AND by telling the truth to willful, evil hearts.

The response of the religious and political elite was to eliminate this threat to their claims of superiority, the right they thought they had to control others, and to nail the God of love to a cross and let him die. And the God of love let them do it. The God of love let them do it – us do it – not because we are more powerful, but because we are weak and he is strong, oh, so very strong: God's love is so much stronger than our hate, and eternal life is so much more powerful than death.

The only way for us to understand that strength was for God to show us that nothing can stop *the love that moves the sun and all the stars*.²

God's submission to our sentence of death on the cross, soon followed by God's resurrection at Easter, are arms of love that embrace the entirety of Creation.

Jesus knew all this before he died, what with being God and all, and this is the love WE are supposed to be showing to each other.

We are commanded by the God of all Creation to love each other as our Easter God loves us.

How do we do that? How do we love each other?

I've said this 1,000 times, I'll say it again: Love isn't something we feel, it's something we do.

This may come as a pretty big surprise, but we don't get to choose what love looks like for another person.

When we tell another person, "Here's what I like to do, and I'm going to do it for you to show you I love you," that is still all about us, and we are not loving them, we're serving our own interests.

The first act of love is to listen to another person – listen without judgment, without needing to agree or disagree.³

It's not about you. What's life like for them? Jesus listened to them all.

He listened to his mother and saved a wedding feast.

He listened to a loose woman by a well in the heat of the day and restored her dignity.

He listened to the pleas of a desperate foreign mother of a dying girl, not only healing the child, but expanding the circle of God's care to embrace an ancient enemy.

Speaking of enemies, Jesus listened to a Roman centurion healed his beloved servant.

Love listens first, then acts.

Jesus rarely imposed, he called, he invited, he taught. When people wanted to leave him, he let them go.

But he also told them the truth about the consequences of their decision to turn away.

He didn't stop loving them, but he never forced them to follow his way.

Except once: turning over those tables in the Temple. That was pretty forceful.

I'll bet those tables were back up and in business by sunrise, though.

We'll almost always find a way to follow our willful and evil hearts.

Jesus commands his disciples to love each other as he loved us.

I know we're supposed to separate church and state in this country,

but when politicians – or any person – uses the name of Christ to justify actions

without listening to the ones who will suffer the most, actions that increase the likelihood

that another of God's little ones will endure more fear, poverty, despair and untimely death,

we see that nothing much has changed since Good Friday.

² Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradise*.

³ This insight comes from a highly practical book that on love in a marriage: *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts* by Gary Chapman, Northfield Publishing, 2015.

I'm NOT saying that the government has to solve all our problems;
 I AM saying that if a politician – or anyone on this planet – calls on the name of Jesus to justify an action,
 that action needs to look a lot like what God's love in action looked like
 when Jesus of Nazareth walked the dusty roads of Palestine.

We all need to start with the basics that Karl Barth learned at his mother's knee:

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

Little ones to him belong; they are weak and he is strong, but there's more.

Belonging to Jesus is beautiful, but if we would be his disciples, to be his hands and feet in the world,
 we need to follow Jesus' new commandment, to love each other as Jesus loves us.

That's a very, very tall order, to love another more than life itself.

Of course, Jesus knows we are too weak to do that, our hearts are too willful and evil,
 but he commanded us to do it anyway, and we shouldn't even be THINKING of doing it on our own!

That's how we get in trouble because we'll always be confusing our desires with what other needs.
 But we don't need to do it on our own. Day after day, week after week, year after year,
 the Spirit knits all Creation together into one; Jesus gives us himself,
 and our heavenly Father gives us each other.

This abiding presence of God in with and among us is all we need
 to follow Jesus' new commandment to do as he did:

to listen to the miserable,

forgive the unforgivable,

heal the incurable,

and love the unlovable,

until there is no mourning, crying or pain anymore in all Creation.

Yes, we can sing *Jesus loves me, this I know . . .*

and we also need to add another verse; sing it with me:

Jesus loves YOU, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

Little ones to him belong; they are weak and he is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves you; yes, Jesus loves you; yes, Jesus loves you; the Bible tells me so.

COLLECT OF THE DAY

O Lord God, you teach us that without love, our actions gain nothing. Pour into our hearts your most excellent gift of love, that, made alive by your Spirit, we may know goodness and peace, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

JEREMIAH 3:16–17

And in those days, when your numbers have greatly increased in the land, declares the Lord, people will no longer talk about the Lord's covenant chest; they won't recall or remember it; they won't even miss it or try to build another one. At that time, they will call Jerusalem the Lord's throne, and all nations will gather there to honor the Lord's name. No longer will they follow their own willful and evil hearts.

PSALM 148

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights.

Praise him, all you angels of his; praise him, all his host.

Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars.

Praise him, heaven of heavens, and you waters above the heavens.

Let them praise the Name of the Lord; for he commanded, and they were created.

He made them stand fast for ever and ever; he gave them a law which shall not pass away.

Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea-monsters and all deeps;

Fire and hail, snow and fog, tempestuous wind, doing his will;

Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars;

Wild beasts and all cattle, creeping things and winged birds;

Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the world;

Young men and maidens, old and young together.

Let them praise the Name of the Lord, for his Name only is exalted,

his splendor is over earth and heaven.

He has raised up strength for his people and praise for all his loyal servants, the children of Israel, a people who are near him. Hallelujah!

REVELATION 21:1–6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, “Look! God’s dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” Then the one seated on the throne said, “Look! I’m making all things new.” He also said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “All is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will freely give water from the lifegiving spring.

JOHN 13:31–35

When Judas was gone, Jesus said, “Now the Human One has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify the Human One in himself and will glorify him immediately. Little children, I’m with you for a little while longer. You will look for me—but, just as I told the Jewish leaders, I also tell you now—‘Where I’m going, you can’t come.’” “I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.”

SERMON HYMN: *We Are One In the Spirit*

BLESSING: The God who is creating a new heaven and a new earth, who walks where least expected, who disturbs the comfortable and comforts the distressed, and whom death could not control, now sends you out to announce with your lives that the Lord is risen indeed. Go, you are blessed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.