

Epiphany 4C, 2016  
Peace, Seattle  
January 31, 2016  
1 Cor 13:1-13, Luke 4:16-30

## **LOVE BEYOND LIMITS**

On her new album, singer and songwriter Brittany Howard—recently nominated for six Grammys with her band ALABAMA SHAKES—includes a track entitled: I'M IN OVER MY HEAD where her voice and others are layered on top of the main melody in cumulative waves, over and over again.

**When asked what she was after by writing the song this way, Howard explained it this way:**

If energy is never destroyed, then anyone you've ever loved and anyone who's ever loved you—none of that love ever goes away, it never disappears, it's always around you. The meaning of the song is realizing this—I'M OVER MY HEAD IN LOVE. Not necessarily romantic love but love.

I wanted [you] to feel like you're being buried, she said, not in a bad way but buried in the best way possible—buried with love, buried with sensation, buried in ways that are never lost or forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

What Brittany Howard seeks to communicate in song, St. Paul seeks to communicate in poetry.

**LOVE BEARS ALL THINGS, BELIEVES ALL THINGS, HOPES ALL THINGS, ENDURES ALL THINGS. LOVE NEVER ENDS.**

In the chapters leading up to 13, Paul has tried to help the Corinthians see that, as richly endowed as they are with spiritual gifts, those gifts have a purpose beyond serving the individual; they've been given by the Spirit to serve the common good—the whole body of Christ.

The purpose toward which they're all pressing is LOVE—unconditional love—the kind of love God shows us in Jesus. It's this love Paul spends the whole chapter describing.

YOU CAN HAVE EVERY KIND OF GIFT THERE IS, Paul says between the lines, BUT IT WON'T AMOUNT TO A HILL OF BEANS IF YOU DON'T HAVE LOVE. Every other gift will come and go and even life itself will one day end—but LOVE, the love with which God loves us in Jesus—abides.

**Love outlasts everything else.**

This LOVE, as elusive as it can be in our marriages and family lives, is worth striving for, worth setting our minds toward, even if we never quite attain it. For finally the point is what we may never achieve, what seems always beyond our ability to grasp—God has already embodied in Jesus. Love without limits. Love that never ends.

Love without limits? No pre-conditions? Really?

How that's going to work? we wonder. Shouldn't there be some rules? Some boundaries?

So we try building hedges around love, because, in the end, people should get what they deserve, shouldn't they? And how can that happen if God in Christ loves us indiscriminately?

**Love like that offends us.**

Paired with the LOVE chapter today is the story of Jesus' first hometown sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth. We heard the first part last week and today we get the rest of the story.

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<sup>1</sup> Edited, from an interview of Howard had with Terry Gross on Fresh Air, January 28, 2016 <http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=464631594&m=464723740&live=1>

Reading from the prophet Isaiah Jesus announces his mission—God’s mission:

- good news for the poor
- release for captives
- sight for the blind
- freedom for the oppressed
- proclaim God’s Jubilee.

TODAY, he tells the hometown crowd, THIS SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING.

Now at first, reviews of the sermon trend positive.

HEY—JOE’S BOY DID ALL RIGHT, DIDN’T HE? HE’S DOING US PROUD!

But then Jesus—perhaps not quite convinced the congregation got the song beneath his words—starts spelling things out in no uncertain terms.

DOUBTLESS YOU WILL SAY, ‘DO HERE ALSO IN YOUR HOMETOWN THE THINGS WE HEARD YOU DID AT CAPERNAUM,’ he says.

In other words, GIVE US SOME LOVE, JESUS—DON’T WE DESERVE AS MUCH AND BETTER—AFTER ALL WE ARE YOUR PEOPLE, THIS IS YOUR HOMETOWN! AND LOVE BEGINS AT HOME, JESUS, DON’T YOU KNOW.

And Jesus, in response, lays out example upon example of God’s compassionate and loving actions pushing beyond the boundaries of hometown, beyond boundaries of home religion, beyond boundaries of home country to include even Israel’s enemies.

**And that part doesn’t go over well. The nods of approval turn into shouts of HOW DARE HE! And the hometown crowd is ready to drive him out of their midst and over the cliff.**

**Jesus sets the agenda for ministry, lays out the parameters, and conflict is a result.**

**What is it about unconditional love that offends us so?**

**Why is it that we want—we need—to impose limits and set criteria about whom God can love?**

**We keep trying to put limits on God’s love, but there are no limits.**

**We try figuring out who deserves God’s love—who ought to be first in line—and Jesus says there is no line! And we’re still trying to get our heads and our hearts around what that means.**

Perhaps you’ve heard about [Larycia Hawkins](#), a tenured professor of political science at conservative [Wheaton College](#) in Illinois. In December, as anti-Muslim sentiment rose in the US and around the world after Paris and San Bernardino, Dr. Hawkins chose to demonstrate her solidarity with her Muslim neighbors by wearing a headscarf—a hijab.

“I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims,” she posted on her Facebook page, “because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God.”

As a result of that post, which college administrators say put her at odds with the doctrine of faith Wheaton faculty are sworn to uphold, Professor Hawkins was suspended by the college and the administration began taking steps to fire her.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more background information, go to: <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-wheaton-college-hijab-larycia-hawkins-1223-met-20151222-story.html>

The Wheaton College faculty have spoken in defense of Ms. Hawkins, and a nationwide movement has been launched in support of her, but it remains to be seen whether these efforts will make a difference.

At a time when tribalism, nationalism and religious bigotry are on the rise and fundamentalism of every stripe seeks to draw hard lines and assign destinies, the testimonies of Paul and of Jesus this morning invite us to go beyond those boundaries.

Through the Word and at the Table Christ calls us to a more mature faith; a way of being in community that puts an end to childish ways.

We see now in a mirror dimly, says Paul, but one day we will see face to face; one day we will know completely, even as we have been completely known.

Now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Amen.