



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 4
June 20, 2021

Widen Your Hearts

2 Corinthians 6:1–13

¹ Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For he says, “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. ³ We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

¹¹ We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. ¹² You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. ¹³ In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

Luther was opposed to what’s known as corporate confession – that part of the service in which we all confess our sins together in a sort-of generic way. We admit that we’re sinners in need of forgiveness, but we don’t get very specific about what our own particular sins are. We do give ourselves a few seconds of silence to contemplate our sins and lay them at Jesus’ feet, but personally, I never find the time allotted to be sufficient. Luther’s primary objection to corporate confession was that, once the church started doing this, no one would come to private confession anymore. You see, it’s in private confession that we actually get to take the time to unload the sins that burden our conscience, to confess specific sins and then to receive a very specific absolution.

The Lutheran Service Book has made this process far easier than it used to be by including a brief liturgy for the private confession of sins. I can tell you that Luther was absolutely right in his concerns, for in our day hardly anybody takes advantage of this opportunity. And that’s sad for a number of reasons.

For one thing, it’s sad because people are missing out on some very expressive, very candid, very revealing words that are spoken in private confession – words like these:

“I have not let [God’s] love have its way with me, and so my love for others has



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failed.”

There is *so* much truth in that one little phrase! It reflects what Paul says in today’s epistle: “I have been restricted by my own affections.” Now, this is not to say that we have no love for God or for one another, but we set limits on our love. We build a fence around our affections which no one – not even ourselves – can climb over. Our love only goes so far. There’s only so much we’re willing to do for our neighbor and – astonishingly – there is only so much we’re willing to do for God. We limit our love. That’s God’s own verdict against us: We are restricted by our own affections.

Why do we do this? Because, as we confess in the private confession,

“I have lived as if God did not matter and as if I mattered most.”

This is more than just doing a few things wrong. This is not losing your temper or speaking harshly when you get frustrated or forgetting to send your dad a Father’s Day card. This is a fundamental elevating of ourselves to a position of prominence that eclipses even God. How does our preeminent attitude shape the way we live? How does it influence the way we treat others?

For instance, how does it affect our generosity? Do we always give sacrificially with joy or do we give begrudgingly, because we’ll look like a cad if our neighbor can’t feed his family or because the church really needs a roof, and so on. Are there particular people we’re more willing to help than others? “I don’t like his politics” or “she’s not the right color.” “She got pregnant out of wedlock” or “he’s not the right kind of Lutheran.” I’m not judging, beloved, because I have some of the same thoughts. But are they good thoughts? I don’t think so.

How about kindness in general? In private confession, the confessor says,

“There are those whom I have hurt, and those whom I have failed to help.”

Are there those to whom you give a thin smile and then keep right on walking, intentionally choosing not to show love to them for whatever reason? Maybe he talks too much, maybe she won’t listen, maybe you don’t have anything in common. In today’s epistle God is telling you that the problem might not actually be with the other person; the problem might be you. You may be restricted by your affections, and I’m right there with you.

These examples may seem minor, but that’s really the point. We often think of our sin in large terms. You even hear people say, “I’m not that bad of a sinner, I never killed anyone.” But sin is more than the things we consider big. The “little” sins are just as hurtful to others and damaging to our relationship with God.

Some might think that limiting our love isn’t as bad as not loving at all. But, today’s epistle doesn’t refer to our complete failure to love, it addresses the calculated *limitation*



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we place on our love. “You are restricted by your own affections,” Paul says. You and I are boxed in, beloved, inhibited, restrained in our love. What is it that restricts us? Our own interests, our own concerns, the short list of things we really want to love – which doesn’t include God or our neighbor. You see, it all comes back to living as if God didn’t matter and as if I mattered most. Yes, it’s hard for me to love someone else fully and completely when loving myself requires so much of my time and attention.

“I have not let His [God’s] love have its way with me, and so my love for others has failed. There are those whom I have hurt, and those whom I have failed to help. My thoughts and desires have been soiled with sin.”

This is not a good place to be, and God’s Word through the apostle Paul further convicts us with the admonition to “widen our hearts.” He’s telling us to tear down our favorite fence. He wants us to open the locked gate and make our survival reserves available to our neighbor.

I don’t know about you, but God might as well tell me to “sell all that [I] have and give to the poor” (Mark 10:21). He says, “Widen your heart,” but mine feels as thick as the walls of Jericho. Good luck knocking down that wall, God! You’d have a better chance rebuking the wind and ordering the sea to be still!

But, thank God, today’s Gospel gives us some relief from today’s Epistle. After all, the God who tells us to “widen our hearts” is the same God who told the storm to “be still!” And what happened? The wind ceased and there was a great calm.

Wind is wild and disobedient, and yet a single word from Jesus calms it down. I am locked tight, resolute, and “restricted by [my] own affections.” But even the wind and the waves obey Jesus. His Word has its way with them. If His Word softens the obstinate wind, surely it can soften me, too! Jesus’ Word changes the will of the waves! His words have the same power to change your will and mine.

You see, when God said to the wind and the waves, “Peace, be still!” a miracle took place. The miraculous power of God’s Word calmed the sea. The sea no longer had any reason to rage and foam with its Lord and Creator standing in its midst.

In the same way, God says to you today, “Widen your hearts.” And with these words, another miracle takes place. Just as the miraculous power of God’s Word calmed the sea, so also will it widen your heart. After all, what do you have to fear? Why hide behind the limitation of your affections when your Lord and Creator stands so near?

God gave you His infinite and limitless love when Jesus died on the cross. Not only are your sins forgiven, not only has He continued to show His love to you throughout your life, but there’s plenty more forgiveness and love where that came from! God’s love for you will never run out and His forgiveness will never fade. There’s no need for you or me to restrict ourselves by our own affections.

God gives you daily bread, beloved – everything you need to support this body and



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life. Whatever you give away, He's more than able to replace sevenfold. Whatever you lose, He's more than able to repay. "Peace, be still!" Don't be afraid!

Beloved, we all have to admit that we have not let [God's] love have its way with us, and so our love for others has failed (LSB, 292). But thanks be to God, He will not cease speaking His words to us! He says to us, "Widen your hearts," just as He said to the wind, "Peace, be still!" And if wind and waves are nothing for Him, neither is my Jericho-heart. Dear God, faithfully widen what we cannot. In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen