

Beyond: Love Surpassing

A sermon and worship prep resource for General Assembly 2026
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada



2026 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

BEYOND:
LOVE SURPASSING

EPHESIANS 3:14-21

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Introduction

On July 10-11, 2026, Disciples from across the United States and Canada will gather online to worship, learn, and work together at our annual General Assembly. Our theme – “Beyond: Love Surpassing” – continues the spirit of last year’s “Beyond,” and takes it deeper, into the heart of Ephesians 3:14–21: a prayer for the church to know a love that surpasses knowledge.

The Proclamation Project has designed this resource to help your congregation prepare. On General Assembly Sunday (June 28, 2026) preachers and worshippers will explore a passage that describes a mystery hidden for ages and now revealed: that the deep logic of the universe is not division and hostility, but a love that gathers all things to itself. We hope your congregation will be enamored and enchanted by its promise starting in June, so that we might gather ready to dive deeper into God’s surpassing love together in July.

This resource includes:

1. Scriptural Reflection on Ephesians 3:14–21
2. Consider This: Questions for Preachers
3. Disciples at Work: Connections to Disciples Ministries
4. In Your Own Context Prompts
5. For All Ages and Abilities: A children’s moment idea
6. Call to Worship
7. Prayer

About the Contributors

Rev. Dr. Lance Pape

Rev. Dr. Lance Pape (he/him) is the Granville and Erline Walker Associate Professor of Homiletics at Brite Divinity School. He holds the M.Div. from Yale Divinity School (1994) and the Ph.D. from Emory University (2010). His teaching and research are focused on homiletical theory, and biblical hermeneutics and preaching. An ordained minister, he has served congregations in Texas, Alabama, and New York. Lance is married to the Rev. Dr. Katie Hays (Disciples of Christ), and they are the parents of two children.



Rev. Remi Shores

Rev. Remi Shores (they/them) was ordained at Galileo Church in 2023, and now serves as the Program Director of the Proclamation Project. Remi holds a Master of Divinity from Brite Divinity School, where they were recognized as a Walker Preaching Scholar. Their work sits at the intersection of homiletical formation, operational systems, and digital ministry, drawing on years of pastoral leadership at congregations in Texas, Iowa, and California. They currently live in Oakland, California, with their spouse and child. Remi is the founder and director of Systems for Ministry (systemsforministry.com), a consulting practice helping churches build the operational and technological infrastructure their ministries deserve.



Scriptural Reflection

Rev. Dr. Lance Pape

The structure of Ephesians is divided neatly between a narration of what God has accomplished (chapters 1–3), and an exhortation to Christian communities to live in a manner that is worthy of such an outpouring of mysterious grace (chapters 4–6). This passage at the end of chapter 3 is the transition between these two parts of the epistle. It includes a prayer (3:13–19) that pleads for God to transform the church with a deep understanding of what God has done, and a short doxology (3:20–21) that celebrates God’s power to do so beyond our wildest expectations. A church so transformed will indeed be empowered “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...” (4:1).

The “for this reason” that begins the passage (3:14) invokes the entire narrative of God’s work unfolded throughout the opening chapters. It’s a story about a secret plan hatched all the way back “before the foundation of the world” (1:4). The existence of the plan is a “mystery.” In other words, it’s not something that can be figured out just by thinking about it. Even Sherlock Holmes could not put the clues together through deduction and uncover it. It’s a grand plot that can only be known if the Divine Conspirator chooses to reveal it.

Paul^[1] didn’t figure out the plan on his own. It was disclosed to him by God (3:3). And now it is the apostle’s responsibility to “make everyone see...the mystery hidden for ages” (3:9).

And what exactly is this secret plan, concealed for ages and then revealed at last? On one level, the content of the mystery is shockingly particular – it may even strike us as a bit obscure. It is simply the peaceful joining of two groups that had once been divided by hostility. In Christ, Gentiles and Jews, once separated, have been brought together by God (2:11–13). Mystery solved.

But, upon deeper reflection, the conspiracy grows. Something that at first seemed hyper local and particular to Paul’s situation begins to open onto much wider horizons of significance. With only a little theological imagination, we begin to realize that we are invited into the holiest of places to receive a disclosure that answers a fundamental question about the nature and character of God. Is God a force of division, or of unity? Is the world God made an arena of competition, or a commons of cooperation? Is the deep logic at the heart of all things an enmity that drives people apart into separate, warring camps, or a Love that gathers all things to itself? A Love that will not let us go?

[1] The author is either the apostle, or a close follower continuing his work after his death.

Scriptural Reflection

“For this reason” Paul says, “I bow my knees” (3:14). It is a posture that has abandoned the decorum of formal prayer; knees are for begging when the stakes are high. And what is this urgent request?

The prayer is for us, the church, to know this great love — not just to know about it, but to know it in a way that transforms us. To know it, as we say, by heart. And as prayers for help sometimes do, the request all comes out in one big, unwieldy sentence: Spirit-given strength for our inner being, that Christ might dwell within, that we be rooted and grounded in love (3:16–17). Paul even tries to give language to the dimensions of such a love — breadth, length, height, depth — as though four coordinates could map the extra-dimensional space of the human heart (3:18). But the request is finally clear enough: that we should know a love that surpasses all human knowing (3:19). Such impossible knowledge comes as a gift, or not at all.

Paul is confident that God will do this impossible thing for the church — that God will do even more than we know how to “ask or think” (3:20). Indeed, God’s glory is precisely the gift of such a love made real and effective in otherwise fallible human communities “throughout all generations” (3:21), which must surely include even us.

Consider This

Questions for sermon preparation — Rev. Dr. Lance Pape

1. Preachers, like the apostle, feel a tremendous responsibility to “make everyone see.” But the passage also holds a word of grace — a reminder that this is God’s work to do. What would it look like for the sermon to follow the rhetoric of this passage closely by functioning as a kind of prayer for God to get on with it? If you’re feeling creative, this is a promising, but challenging, sermon form, inviting the congregation to overhear the pastor on their knees pleading that God might help us all come to see this surpassing love more clearly.

2. The secret that a unifying love is the deep structure of reality is both already revealed in Christ, and not yet brought to fullness. There is still so much in our world that remains divided, hostile, broken. What are the indications in your context that the dividing wall of hostility endures? What are the signs that a deeper logic of unity, peace, and healing is also at work?

3. Among the things dividing our world are the algorithms that customize our experience of reality when we spend time online. The companies that control these algorithms have discovered that we are more valuable to them when we are enraged. Anger keeps us scrolling, outrage keeps us clicking, and each click teaches the machine to show us more of what inflames us and less of what might stir understanding of those we disagree with. We end up living in different realities — divided worlds curated not for truth but for engagement. The agency at work in such tampering with the human heart is not the will of any one person, but of larger forces. Paul has a name for this kind of thing: he calls it a “principality,” a “power,” or in this context “rulers and authorities” (3:10). How might a sermon on Ephesians 3 help a congregation name the algorithmic powers that profit from our division, and then point toward practices that focus our attention on the mystery of love secretly at work beneath all things?

Disciples At Work

Rev. Remi Shores

The prayer in Ephesians 3 pleads that the church would know — not merely know about, but truly know, with our bodies as well as our minds — a love capable of breaking down every wall of hostility. Disciples ministries are living out that prayer right now.

Reconciliation Ministries works to repair broken relationships across lines of race, ethnicity, and social division within the church, grounded in the conviction that reconciliation is not a program but a calling; not a state of being, but the deep logic of the universe. Learn more at reconciliationministry.org.

Disciples Mission Fund (DMF) brings the whole Church together and empowers us to answer the call to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. DMF connects us to the life-giving and love surpassing work we have been called to do. No matter the challenges we face — from supporting students to ending human trafficking, from starting a church to sustaining a community — Disciples know that by sharing the work, we accomplish what, by God's design, we cannot do alone. Learn more and give at disciplesmissionfund.org.

In Your Own Context

Where are the “dividing walls of hostility” in your congregation’s community — the places where people live in separate worlds? What might it look like for your church to be a place where those walls come down? How might you live into the deep logic of the universe God designed, rather than the divisive logic of the world we live in? What small act of bridge-building could your congregation commit to this week?

For All Ages and Abilities

Rev. Remi Shores

Children’s Moment: The Mystery of Love

Items needed: a magnifying glass; a small object with an interesting or irregular shape (a pinecone, a seashell, a piece of coral, or similar).

Hold up the magnifying glass and tell the children: “Detectives use magnifying glasses to look closely at mysteries — clues that are hard to understand at first.” Then pull out the object and pass the magnifying glass around, letting each child look at it up close.

Ask: “Can you describe what you see? How wide is it? How tall? How deep are these ridges — how far do they go in?” Let them try. It gets complicated fast. “It’s hard to describe, isn’t it? Even holding it in your hands, there’s so much we can’t quite put into words.”

“Today’s scripture is about a love that’s even harder to describe than this. Paul tries anyway — he says it has breadth, and length, and height, and depth. But then he admits that this love actually *surpasses* knowledge. It’s bigger than our words for it. And the most amazing mystery of all? That love is for you.”

Call to Worship

Adapted from Psalm 145:10-13

Rev. Remi Shores

One: All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord.

All: And we, the faithful, shall bless you.

One: We shall speak of the mystery of your kingdom,
and tell of your power,
to make known to all people your mighty deeds.

All: And the all-surpassing Love of your kingdom.

Your Reign is everlasting,

and your dominion of love is a kinship across all generations.

Prayer

Rev. Remi Shores

Adopt a posture of submission or surrender – hands uplifted, empty palms facing heavenward.

God of immeasurable love, we confess that we often settle for knowing about you with our brains – mapping the dimensions of your grace as though on a graph, while keeping a careful distance from its embodied depths. This day, we ask for more. Strengthen us in our inner being. Dwell in our bodies. Root us in a love we cannot fully understand or contain – and help us to stop attempting understanding and containment. Do in us and among us more than we dare to ask or imagine – and in all of it, receive the glory. In Christ, in whom the mystery has been made known, we pray. Amen.

**Developed by the Proclamation Project, a ministry of the
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disciplespreaching.org**

Blessing for 2026 General Assembly Congregational Delegates

based on Ephesians 3:14-21

Use the following "Blessing for Congregational Delegates" in worship on General Assembly Sunday, June 28, 2026.

Leader: For this reason, I bow my knees before the Creator from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, and for the ways [insert names] will represent [- Christian Church -- insert name of congregation]. I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that your gifts and the hopes of our congregation will strengthen and be enriched by the wider church across the United States and Canada.

Congregation: May [insert names] be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit. May your lived experience, challenges, and wisdom learned in this community dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being further rooted and grounded in love.

Leader: I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with saints from far and near, saints from generations past and generations to come, to learn and discern what is the breadth and length and height and depth of God's vision.

Congregation: Blessed with the gift of time to listen and learn together, may you grow to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God as you take action and make decisions to the glory of God.

All: Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. To God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

General Assembly New Triennium Calendar

As the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) moves into our new triennium structure, General Assembly will now gather every year with online assemblies for two years followed by one in-person assembly.

Upcoming General Assembly Dates:

2026 General Assembly

Online

July 10 -11, 2026

2027 General Assembly

Online

July 9 - 10, 2027

2028 General Assembly

In Person

July 8 - 11, 2028

This new structure creates greater accessibility, increased participation, and more consistent connection across the church while continuing the tradition of gathering together in person every third year.