

Where is my love to go?

Imagine God asking that question. You'll get an insight into God's heart.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [June 16, 2021](#) issue



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I've had the privilege of experiencing ministry in many settings. I've spent time in a rust belt postindustrial community and in a commuter suburb. I've served in an outer-urban housing project and in a shabby-chic urban village. I've enjoyed a prestigious university chapel and a world-famous church at the center of a global city. But there's been one consistent thread throughout: people's powerlessness.

In every setting, I've sensed that ministry is about encountering people in their powerlessness. Some powerlessness is obvious: a person can't find a place to sleep or a job to feed their family. Some is subtler: a Nobel prize winner can't find a way to translate the findings that brought such acclaim into a product that can address a basic human need.

Most people know what Christianity is supposed to be about: it's about the powerlessness of guilt, and how Christ wipes that guilt away, enabling us to live

freely, now and forever. But not many people struggle with guilt in such a straightforward way. In my experience, people are mostly depressed by failure—their own shortcomings and their inability to be able to put such gifts as they have to work in making things better for themselves or others. If I have one simple message to this large majority of people I've met in my role as a pastor, it's to stake less on such measurable outcomes that are perpetually out of reach and channel more energy into relationships that can be had and fostered today.

Which leaves me vulnerable when a person says, "I've tried that." I met such a person in the last year. In fact, we've never actually met, in the prepandemic sense: we've simply spent many hours together in groups on online conference platforms. Such groups have gone deeper than any I've led before. Somehow the virus, the face-to-face nature of the online platform, and the comfort of being in one's own home have combined to make people more willing to share profound truths about their lives and deep yearnings.

And so it was that I shared what I took to be the big reveal about Christianity. When God settled on the single most significant thing of all, it turned out that thing was being with us as a human being just like us. Not to change us, but simply to be with us. And what we discovered from God being with us was that the most surprising thing about God was that God is relationship: there's nothing in God that's not relationship. Relationship isn't the way God does or communicates something more important; it is what God fundamentally is. So there.

But one group member wasn't impressed. "What d'you mean, relationship?" he retorted. I thought I'd make it simple, more vernacular. "Love," I said. "It's all about love, about being with one another. Love's the only thing that lasts forever." Who could disagree with that?

He could. Big time. He got angry. "Don't talk to me about love," he sneered, almost spitting. "How's that supposed to relate to me? My partner left years ago. My family lives miles away. And my last dog just died. . . . I loved that dog." It was, I had to acknowledge, a litany of failed relationships. So much for my version of the heart of all things. But he hadn't finished. "Where's my love to go now?" he almost shouted, the other group members seeming to fade into the background as he focused his anger—which, like much anger, was an expression of hurt and pain—on me.

"Where's my love to go? Tell me that."

Some questions genuinely seek an answer; others are meant to end a conversation. I wasn't sure which kind this one was. But you spend your energy in ministry seeking to create circumstances where there's enough trust to generate a moment where it feels like a person's whole fate and destiny is on the line. When such a moment arises, you can't walk away from it.

So I took a risk, and said, gently, "Imagine eternity from God's point of view. Imagine God having all that love pent up like you have right now. But the difference is, God's got that love all pent up potentially forever. God's like you. God's thinking, 'Where's my love to go?' So God creates the universe. But God's got still more love to give. So God creates life, and makes humanity, and calls a special people. But that's still not enough. God's got yet more love to give. So God comes among us as a tiny baby. God's question 'Where is my love to go?' is perhaps the most important one of all time. Half the answer is the creation of the universe. The other half is the incarnation. On Christmas Day we find out why the universe was created. It was created for us to be the place where God's love could go."

In case I hadn't made myself clear, I added one more suggestion. "So when you ask yourself, 'Where's my love to go?' you're getting an insight into the very heart of God."

The pandemic has been about many things, but one above all: powerlessness. It's been an intensification of life's fragilities and limitations. We've felt fearful, lonely, and disappointed. Where is our love to go? We've not been getting an easy answer to this question. We're getting something else instead: the discovery of what it's like to be God, who asked the same question and came among us to complete the answer. What the pandemic's given us is an opportunity to dwell in the very heart of God.