

Rooted and Grounded in Love
Pastor Jim Cords
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The holy Gospel for today comes to us from the Gospel of Matthew, the 22nd chapter:

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap Jesus in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Lord Jesus, it is an honor to be in this place, serving You, serving this congregation as pastor. I thank You and I ask You to be with us in this journey, as we seek to grow in faith and witness, as we place our trust and confidence in You and in Your work in and through us to serve Saint Timothy's, to serve San Jose. Bless us now as we hear Your word proclaimed. In Jesus' name, amen.

I'm particularly honored today to be able to preach to you from a set of verses that I call my life verse. Ephesians 3:14-21 has been a prayer that I have turned to from long before I was a pastor. Hearing Paul's prayer in these verses has been an encouragement from the very beginning and will be an encouragement to me as I serve together with you here at Saint Timothy's. Rooted and grounded in love, we set out to do the mission that sends us in His Spirit to do. These verses I pray that they will bless you. Paul begins "for this reason, I bow my knees before the Father." For this reason. Well, what reason is that? Is Paul about to tell us, in the prayer itself, what his reason is for praying, or has he already told us in the previous verses why he's about to pray before God. To humbly submit himself to the Father, to pray for the saints in Ephesus and for us. I want to submit to you that Paul has already told them why he's about to pray. That when he says for this reason, he's saying for the reason mentioned before, I bow before God on your behalf and pray His blessing upon you, His people, and His church.

And so we look to the first part of Ephesians Chapter 3 which begins with these words, "Live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

Live a life worthy. Sometimes I hear those words and I think that I have to be worthy in and of myself, in how I live out this goodness, that I'm set apart and I have to be set apart from the world and I'm not supposed to conduct myself the way they do, that I need to look and sound and be different from the world. But what I want to suggest to you is that these words, that this calling to be set apart, to be holy is not to be set apart *from* the world, but to be set apart *for* the world. That we recognize that God has chosen his people from the very beginning, that they would be blessed by God, to be a blessing for the entire world.

It continues, "This mystery is that through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus." God has been working to bring the people of His creation together. From the very beginning, God has chosen His people, so that the nations would be blessed, and the word "Gentiles" is sometimes translated to the nations because it's intended to communicate "everyone who is not Jewish." In Christ, they and we become one family in Christ and that family is on a mission to grow the family, to be living and sharing the transforming love of Jesus with everyone in word and in deed.

And so Paul continues, "For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named." Just to lock that idea in, who is this God to whom Paul is submitting and praying? The One. *The One* from whom every family in heaven and on Earth is named. That is, everyone receives their identity from God who created us all. So Paul is praying to the one Creator of all humanity. And he's reminding us that that's who God is, as he prays for us and makes a request on our behalf that God would bless us, lead us, establish us in His love.

This is where I want to pause here and look to the Gospel teaching before we go on with Paul's prayer. When Jesus is asked is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not, He knows it's a trick, but He responds and says show me the coin used to pay the tax. And they bring Him a denarius and He asked them whose image, whose portrait and inscription is on this coin. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God. So if the coin is imprinted with the image and inscription of Caesar, what is it that is imprinted with the image and inscription of God? If we're to render to Caesar what is Caesar's, what to God? Is it not our very lives, our very selves? Isn't it that all human beings are created in the image of God? We are God's image-bearers and so our lives are to be offered to God. Money, that's a minor thing. What about as we are created in His image.

Then Paul continues his prayer. "I pray that out of his glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being." I pray that out of the riches of God, that you the saints of Ephesus, that you children of God, that you who are called Christian by being named in the family of God you would receive power through the spirit in your very soul.

I don't know about you. There have been many times in recent days when I have not felt particularly strong, when I have felt overwhelmed by the challenges of COVID-19, when I have wondered about what it means to be a pastor in common, to be a pastor of a large church, preaching to a near-empty sanctuary. I want to meet you. I want to know you. But I also want you to understand that I don't pastor by my own strength, but by the strength of the Spirit that is within me. And I don't call you and encourage you to be a witness for Christ in the world by your own strength, but rather by that same Holy Spirit that is in you. It can give you the strength to be whoever God needs you to be, to do whatever God needs you to do. We are not only called to be the church, we are equipped through Word and Spirit to be the church. We rely on His strength, on His direction, on His promptings, and we do it with humility. And we do it, I hate to say, with patience, for God's time, for God to direct us and empowers, for God to surround us with others, so that together, we can be the body of Christ in the world. 1 Corinthians 12:7 says to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. We are gifted by the presence and manifestation of the Holy Spirit within our spirit so that together we can serve the common good as is God's desire for us. We receive strength in our inner being.

And Paul continues, and I pray that you saints of God, saints of Ephesus, that you being rooted and established in love may have power together with all the Lord's holy people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge measure of all the fullness of God. That we rooted and established in love not individually, but corporately, together, so that we can comprehend the love of God. Now clearly Paul is referring to a comprehension that brings those people and God's people together.

The Jews often had a difficult time with those Gentiles or even worse, those half-breeds, the Samaritans. And they often copped an attitude and sometimes in our world, we Christians cop an attitude. Sometimes we act or think as if we are superior to others. Sometimes we are far more comfortable, I know I am, hanging around with other Christians and not those people. But if we are to recognize the love of God in its width and length and height and depth, then we are to recognize that God's love extends to all people everywhere. And that as we comprehend it, we become the channels through which God's love reaches everyone, everywhere. It changes how we see the world. As we comprehend the love of Christ, one of the things that happens is we begin to see and understand others from the perspective of Christ's love. So our response, our attitudes are changed. It's not based on what they believe. It's not based on their uncouthness or bad choices or bad hair days. Our actions towards others are rooted in the love of Christ for us and through us for them. Our behavior, our attitudes, and viewpoint are determined by God's love and it changes how we act, how we respond to the world in which we live. The love of Jesus establishes us. It gives us stability in the world that right now is incredibly unstable.

Getting into something I'm not supposed to be getting into right away here in the first sermon, but you'll learn I do that, so might as well start from the beginning. One of the sad notes of my first few days here in Saint Timothy's was learning that that beautiful tree at the front of our property is dying and it has to be removed. It just makes me sad. I'm not really an environmentalist or no one would consider me a tree hugger, but I have, even long before I came to Saint Timothy's, I've loved that tree! That tree represented a history, a stability, an illusion, or at least in recent years, it was an illusion as that tree began to die, to weaken, now to the point of being dangerous.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we can take confidence in the strength of our bank accounts. We can take confidence in the stability of our jobs or the friendships that surround us that can encourage us and walk with us through good times and bad. But fundamentally, our hope is in Jesus and that hope never fails.

My previous congregation was Desert Hope. At the beginning of the church, I was going for something else, but it's the name they chose but it blessed me for all 10 years that I served that church, reminding me that we needed to be a people of hope in a desert. That in wilderness times, in times of scarcity, we can maintain our hope because the stability that is ours in the Gospel, in the good news of Jesus, and His love for us never fails. It will carry us into eternity through all sorts of difficult times.

There is no doubt that there are still hard days ahead. There is no doubt that there will also be days of wonderful celebration ahead, but always we, the church, can take comfort in the prayers of Paul, from the very beginning rooting his church in the faithfulness of God's love for us and for the world that he calls and sends us to serve.

You know Paul wrote this letter to the saints in Ephesus, but Paul also wrote letters to the leader of the saints in Ephesus, that is, his disciple, Timothy after which this church is named. I took great joy in recognizing that Paul wrote this letter to the bishop who was his former disciple. I took great joy that 10 years ago, Saint Timothy's decided to work to be a discipling church, moving out of a program emphasis to a discipling emphasis. I think that's very appropriate for a church named Saint Timothy's and Paul's encouragement to his disciple, Timothy as it led this church that he is praying for here in Ephesians, included this reminder. In his second letter to Timothy, "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God, that the people of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

It's a joy to come to serve a church that has been anchored in the authority of Scripture from its very beginning. It's a joy to know that as we move forward, we will remain anchored in the Scripture, to lead us, to guide us, to correct us when we head off in wrong directions, and to be profitable for establishing our witness on the word of God as we put our trust in His faithfulness, to reveal His character to us, and to reveal His character through us to this community and this world. Brothers and Sisters in Christ, the people of San Jose and Silicon Valley, the people of California, this entire nation, and this world need desperately to know and experience the love of God that is already at work in and through us. We will creatively endeavor to share that love in ways that the world can experience it, coming in Grace and Truth to make the love of God known in a powerful way.

And Paul ends with this amazing doxology, which has always been a deep encouragement to me. He says this, "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church, and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever! Amen." This Jesus whom we worship and follow and serve, this Jesus whose spirit is at work within us is glorified as the One who is able, able to expand the family of God by bringing others to be a part of His family, able to make us his effective witness, to make His love known, and able to do exceedingly abundantly above our thoughts and even our ability to imagine. I've often said here's where we need to dream big, knowing that God dreams bigger. This is where we need to stretch ourselves, all the way to the edge of our ability and resources, knowing that that's never enough for God because He calls us to live not by our resources and ability, but by beyond that which we think we imagine. And He's going to do it by blessing you, so that you can bless each other and that together, we can bless the world in His name.

We are, we have been, and we will be rooted and grounded and established in this love of God because we know the Father who has revealed Himself to us in the Scripture. And we grow as followers, disciples sent by Jesus. We go into our families and our lives. We go into San Jose and into the world. And we go with the Spirit who is the power that is able to go above, to go beyond - way, way above and beyond. You see what we can see is our God will exceed our expectations. Welcome to the next chapter of Saint Timothy's Lutheran Church in San Jose. Welcome to the next chapter that moves on into the future, a future that is secure in Jesus, a future that gives us hope in the midst of scarcity and abundance, a future in which we know the Father, grow as Disciples of Jesus, and go in the Spirit. Thanks be to God! Amen.