

This Sunday's texts:

Genesis 9:8-17

Ephesians 3:14-21

Mark 6:45-56

Rooted and Grounded in Love

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Our gospel for today comes to us from the Gospel of Mark, the sixth chapter:

Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and head across the lake to Bethsaida, while he sent the people home. After telling everyone goodbye, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Late that night, the disciples were in their boat in the middle of the lake, and Jesus was alone on land. He saw that they were in serious trouble, rowing hard and struggling against the wind and waves. About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. He intended to go past them, but when they saw him walking on the water, they cried out in terror, thinking he was a ghost. They were all terrified when they saw him. But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage! I am here!" Then he climbed into the boat, and the wind stopped. They were totally amazed, for they still didn't understand the significance of the miracle of the loaves. Their hearts were too hard to take it in. After they had crossed the lake, they landed at Gennesaret. They brought the boat to shore and climbed out. The people recognized Jesus at once, and they ran throughout the whole area, carrying sick people on mats to wherever they heard he was. Wherever he went - in villages, cities, or the countryside - they brought the sick out to the marketplaces. They begged him to let the sick touch at least the fringe of his robe, and all who touched him were healed.

The gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Let us pray. Lord Jesus, we pray that you would answer Paul's prayer in our Ephesians lesson for today, that you indeed would root us and

ground us in love, that you indeed would abide and dwell in our hearts, and that it would impact our lives and those around us, to your honor and glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The apostle Paul loves this church in Ephesus. He assigned his own disciple Timothy to be the leader, bishop if you will, of that church and you can read those letters in 1st and 2nd Timothy. But this letter in Ephesians is powerful and this text today, this Ephesians 3:14-21, I have a long referred to as my life verse. It is been significant in my life from probably high school, but certainly in college and beyond. It is a verse that I've had read or a section of verses that I've had read at my ordination, at my wedding, at every church installation I've been a part of. I love this prayer of Paul for his church. It flows out of a movement in the letter in Ephesians.

There are really two parts to this letter with this prayer right in the middle. The first part is doctrine. Paul is writing to the church in Ephesus because Ephesus is a place that has many philosophies and many conversations and even arguments over what is truth. Paul wants the church to know the truth of God's love in Jesus. It's clear in these first sections, the first two chapters of Ephesians that it is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that saves both Jew and Gentile, that is, Jew and non-Jew, all people. Jesus is sent for everyone. Before Paul moves to the second section of this text in Ephesians 4 and following and talks about how this is to be applied in our lives, the details of how we live this truth out, he focuses on this prayer for the church. He focuses on this prayer for me and for you.

Before we move into it, I want to tell you that in my life, I have used this prayer. When I was in college at Azusa Pacific in my first semester, I took a job as a youth director in Upland, California. I served as a youth director at that church throughout my time in college at Azusa Pacific. I learned to rewrite these verses in the form of a prayer for each individual student in my

youth group. I, like Paul, would bow my knees before the Father and pray, as he did, for his church.

It says, “When I think of all of this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the creator of everything in heaven and on earth.”¹ Paul begins this by telling us that because of all these truths that he's referred to earlier in the book of Ephesians, he prays to God and he wants to reinforce the idea of who God is. God is the source of everything. God is the creator of all things. And God is especially the creator of all humanity. Every person was created by God. All people are created in the image of God. All people fall under the authority of God, so it is right and good that as Paul prays, he's praying for all people.

But he's moving specifically to Christ's church. He says, “I pray that from his [God's] glorious, unlimited resources that he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit.”² As Paul prays and moves us from doctrine to life, he reminds us that our God is not a God of scarcity, but of abundance, that God has unlimited resources, and that those resources are at work in our world and in our lives. So he's turning to a god who is able. Able to do what? Able to do whatever God desires. Nothing is impossible for God. So Paul is praying for the people who are created in the image of God and he's praying to the God who is able to do anything God wants to do.

He says that as we are strengthened with this power in our inner beings, inner strength for us, that “Christ will make his home in our hearts as [we] trust in him.”³ We sometimes use language like we're searching for God and even Christians, especially when we encounter low points in our in our lives and in our relationship with God, when we feel like we may be praying

¹ Ephesians 3:14-15

² Ephesians 3:16

³ Ephesians 3:17

to a blank wall, we're told here that Christ makes his home in our hearts. God is with us.

Wherever we go, whatever we face, whatever the challenges are before us, we do not face them alone. This prayer is not making it happen. This prayer is reminding us of that truth, that through faith, Christ is present with us. In faith, we are never alone.

Now, don't start thinking that faith is something you have to conjure up. Faith is, rather again, a part of that amazing work that God does in us. We simply receive it and lean on it. Sometimes we confuse the word faith to some intellectual acknowledgment of something being true, but this language helps us, because it reminds us that we are trusting in him. We're relying on him. We're resting in him. We're counting on him to lead, guide, and give us all that we need in order to live our lives as he would call us and empower us to live.

Then there are these amazing words. "Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is."⁴ What Paul is praying here is that God's people, you and I, that we would find such strength and nurturing in God's love that it would allow us to blossom, to grow, to find strength, even in our weakness and especially in our challenges. The source for God's power to unfold in our lives is rooted in our understanding of the depth of God's love for us. We are not made up by the mistakes of our past. We are not defined by our weaknesses and our struggles, but rather, our identities, our name comes from Jesus. We are who we are in him and his presence in us empowers us to walk through each day, to walk alongside others as they struggle or as they rejoice. We give God the glory for it all and we lean on him and rely on him for strength, encouragement, and guidance through it all.

⁴ Ephesians 3:17-18

Paul uses language here: “how wide, how long, how high, and how deep” to point in every direction. We can recognize that God's love covers everything, includes everyone. I sometimes struggle to understand whether I need to emphasize to you and need emphasized to me God's love for me, God's love for you, because I think so often we think that something we've done or not done, some thought that we have, some sentiments in our lives will disqualify us. Somehow God will love us less because of something we've done or not done. Because we want to progress in our lives. If we haven't progressed the way we think we should, we start to question whether or not God would be too frustrated with us, whether or not he would give up on us. And so we need to be reminded that God's love for us is unconditional. It's rooted in Jesus having given his life for us.

Or especially in the world we live in today, where there are so many different groups of people that are in conflict with one another, a lot of name-calling and putting down and divisions among us. Maybe we need to be reminded even more so today that God loves them. God loves those people that we have somehow distinguished ourselves from, that they are different or less or worse than us. That we're better or have a superior faith, religion, priority, knowledge, habits, whatever you want to say, that it gives us an air of superiority. We're reminded that we have nothing to brag about earlier in the Ephesians. In Ephesians 2:8-9, we're told that it's by grace through faith and not of our works. We have nothing to boast about and then we're told that because of that grace and faith, we can do the good work of loving our neighbor, of uplifting our neighbor, and especially of loving them when they think they're unlovable or when we maybe have the arrogance to think they're unlovable.

God can, by the power of the spirit at work within us, empower us to love others in his name and to his honor and glory. It's the mission of the church to make that love known, especially to those who don't know it or doubt it.

It's really interesting that the text goes on and says this. "May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully."⁵ The English Standard Version says "to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge." To know something that is unknowable, to have an experience of God's love that is so great, it's more than we can possibly comprehend. I think the Christian life is a journey into the depths of God's love for us. I think each day this prayer takes impact and calls us into a deeper and deeper and deeper experience of God's love for us, especially when we're hearing criticism from others, or maybe even most especially, when we're experiencing our own self-critique. When we're disappointed in ourselves, we remember that God's love carries us through, that we're forgiven, and that God's mercies are new every day, so that we can begin afresh in the love, power, and strength of God.

Here's the interesting thing as this text goes on. It says "Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God."⁶ How will you be made complete? By understanding in the fullness of God's love for you and for others. By focusing on understanding what God's love is all about, we grow deeper and stronger and fuller and more complete. It is the journey of life.

Then Paul wants to close this text with a doxology. He began with bowing on his knees before the Father for his glory and goodness. And now, Paul is "[n]ow all glory to God" and then get this, "all glory to God who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish

⁵ Ephesians 3:19

⁶ Ephesians 3:19b

infinitely more than we might ask or think.”⁷ This power of God, this almighty God, as he dwells in our lives and in our hearts, is able to, by that power, work in and through you and me.

Sometimes I think that it's important in planning to take stock of our resources and determine what portion of those resources can be dedicated to the task or goal that is before us. There are times when we have big goals, important goals, priorities, and we will dedicate a lot of resources to make that thing happened, maybe to the sacrifice of many others. And yet, as Paul praises God at the end of this prayer, he helps us to realize that no matter how big we think, no matter how much we ask, God is doing more. We're reminded that it's not our resources that we rely upon, but rather, the resources of this God whose resources are unlimited.

Sometimes, I make the mistake of reading this text that it's just for me. And sometimes, I read this text as God, the Spirit at work in me, rather than in us, in the church, in God's people everywhere, and in all places. I want to say sometimes the resources don't need to be in my pocket because they're in yours. Sometimes the giftedness of God doesn't need to be in my life because it's in your life. God has called us to work together as his people to accomplish his will and purpose. Sometimes I need to offer the little pittance that I bring and when it's combined with all of the gifts of all of God's people, it can accomplish amazing things, again more than we can ask or think. We see that because this glory is to God and then the language is “in the church” and “in Christ Jesus,” not in me, not in you, not for me or for you. We live with the indwelling Christ empowering us and calling us to a much greater purpose than just us. We’re called to be living out the purposes of God, good works that God prepared beforehand for us to do. That's our response to the grace and goodness of God. It's a response that lives into the purpose that God intends for his people.

⁷ Ephesians 3:20

Then there's this final notion as Paul wraps up this prayer, "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout *all generations* forever and ever."⁸ I like things done on my timetable. I'm sometimes way too impatient or at other times, life seems to go by so fast. But this work of God in his creation is generation to generation. A legacy has been left to me, to us and we live with that legacy and we extend that legacy to the generations that will follow us. In here, we see all glory to him in his church, in Christ Jesus, through all generations. This love of God has been since the creation of the world, will go on long beyond us, but we have this incredible privilege of experiencing the love of Christ and then being empowered by it to live out God's purpose and to bring him honor and glory in our lives and our relationships, in our church, in our city, in our world.

Then I remind you the very end, amen. Amen is a word that means "I believe it." It is so. Let it be. We pray this prayer because we recognize, or I should say Paul prays this prayer because he recognizes, that God is the one who does this work. We're relying on him to work this in us, to do empower us to experience it and then to live in the fullness of it. May you know the love of Christ. May you be rooted and strengthened in that love and may you experience the power of God at work within you to blow your mind, as God does in and through you more than you can ask, think, or imagine. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁸ Ephesians 3:21