

The Church: God Has Big Plans

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This Sunday's texts:

Ecclesiastes 9:13-18

Ephesians 3:14-21

Matthew 7:24-29

The holy gospel comes to us from Matthew, the seventh chapter:

[Jesus said] "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, yet it did not fail, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." When Jesus had finished saying those things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, you have made us your church. We pray that the power of your Spirit would continue to be at work in us, uniting us, that we might demonstrate your love to all to your glory and honor. In Jesus' name. Amen.

In the weeks following Easter, we talked about the kingdom of God and the power of God at work in his kingdom, and the authority of those in his kingdom. For the next several weeks, we're going to be talking about the nature of the church. Who are we called and empowered to be? What is God doing and how is he sending us into the world? How might that impact how we live together as God's people?

Ephesians and especially the verses we read this morning, which some of you may already recognize, are my life verses. That prayer of Paul in Ephesians 3:14-21 has been near and dear to my heart for a very, very long time. They are, in fact, a guiding principle.

When we think about the church, more often than not we think about our own experience and our experience as Church often then leads both what we think about the church and what we expect the church to be and do. But as a community made up of sinners who are forgiven, our brokenness sometimes shines through and our experience in the church is not always what God would have wanted it to be, as feelings are hurt, people are betrayed, and things go sideways. In our brokenness and in our relationships, we often experience the church at times in ways that disappoint us.

So how do we understand the church? Well, the first thing we want to recognize is it is us. It's not the building. It's not the institution we're talking about. We are the church. The people of God are the church and what God seeks to express to the world through the church he seeks to express through us. Secondly, as a people of God whose proclamation, faith, and life are set by the word of God, our understanding of who the church is called to be should be rooted in the word, and should be constantly affirmed as we read and study God's word because in it, who we are is defined and what God is doing in and through us is spoken and clarified to give us hope, empowerment, and direction. Our hope is that the associate pastor we find and the call committee in the process will be mindful of who we are called to be as a church. Not simply who we have been in our history. Not simply the programs we have in place, but what God seeks and wants to do through his people here at Saint Timothy's.

The foundation of our actions, built on the words lived out, the words of Jesus lived out, form this solid foundation. One of the things I love about these words of Jesus in our gospel today

is the reality of them. They're not simply Pollyanna. They don't say if you live close to Jesus, life will be beautiful. The weather will be mild and the breeze soothing. No, rather it says he who builds his house on the rock *when* the winds come, *when* the water rises up, *when* the storms rage, it will remain firm. So let's not be surprised when hard times come, when difficulties come. Let's not be surprised when the life we're called to live as God's people is challenging and difficult and requires even more than we can bring to the party. We will need to depend upon and rely upon the power and direction of God in order to be the people God has called us to be in the circumstances of our culture, our community, our family, and even in our friendships here in the church.

Then we remember from James, just as we've been reminded from Jesus. "Do not just listen to God's word. You must do what it says."¹ We are called to be students of the word, so that our knowledge of it continues to grow, so that the power and insight of God's words get spoken into our lives in the midst of our current circumstances. We can listen and by the power of the Holy Spirit and the promptings of the Holy Spirit, we can begin to discern how God's word applies to the circumstances of our lives. Then we recognize that we're not just heads. We're people. We have hands and feet and mouths. And we're called not just to hear the word, but to be doers of it.

When we think we understand God's word but failed to put it into practice, we deceive ourselves. So how do we begin to live that word out? I will suggest to you as a student of the scripture for a lot of years now, that very often clarity in God's word comes from conversations with God's people. Even as a teacher of the word, as I'm teaching, often the comments and questions that come from the people gathered together, deep in the inside of God's word, especially as it is applied to our lives. So I encourage you to continue to be students of the word and also continue to be in conversation regarding that word with your brothers and sisters in Christ so that we might establish the firm foundation and stand strong as God's people, regardless of the circumstances that come our way.

Paul prays for the church in Ephesus and he prays "I pray that out of his glorious riches [God] may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."² Paul, the writer of probably the majority of the New Testament, certainly the writer who wrote the largest part of the New Testament, is praying for us, his church. It's interesting because if you go earlier in the chapter, you will hear Paul testify that it's been this power of God in his own life that enabled him to be an apostle to the Gentiles. So as Paul has experienced God's power to work in and through him, he prays for the church that we too will experience God's power to work in and through us, a power that comes through the very indwelling presence of the spirit, which we celebrated in Pentecost last week.

"Strengthen you through power." When we face circumstances in the church, when the leadership council raises a conflict or a question, especially if it's a big one, one of the things we so often do is ask the question do we have the resources to address this problem? I think a different question is in order and that question is where are the resources God has given us to address this issue? Because we know that God indeed has given us what we need.

Then Ephesians and Paul's prayer says this "so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith [that you] be rooted and grounded in love." Love nurtures our life in Christ. Love expands our ability to see not only what is right, but how and when to apply that truth. I've been mindful as we journey through Ecclesiastes, which is by the way up a pretty depressing book of the Bible, if you

¹ James 1:22 NLT

² Ephesians 3:16-17 NIV

haven't noticed already, I have noticed that one of the things Ecclesiastes is seeking to teach us is, hey, even when it doesn't go as you expect, even if it goes the opposite of the way you expect, continue to fear God, continue to submit to his leading, to his guiding. We, as God's people, established firmly on his word, continue to do what we see the word teaches us to do, even if things aren't going as planned, as matter of fact, *especially* if things aren't going as planned. We root ourselves deeply in the word, but also in the love of God, so that when we apply that truth, we do it with respect. We do it with care. We do it with concern. We don't do it just because we're right. So we do the right thing, in the right way, with the right attitude, at the right time. Very often the love of God pulls us. It stretches us to extend the word of grace and concern to people who frustrate us, to people who disagree with us, but we recognize that the love of God is paramount and we live in the truth, according to that love.

As a matter of fact, there's a really interesting way that Paul does this in prayer because he prays for the church so that we will be able to understand how broad and how long and how high and how deep is the love of Christ, that he's suggesting that we understand it in all of its dimensions. One of the powerful things to recognize is in this book of Ephesians, one of the things Paul is writing about is the struggle that exists in the church at the time between Jews and non-Jews, between those who believe they are insiders and those they see as outsiders. One of the things Paul is called to do is bring them together as one people. When he talks about how broad and long and high and deep is the love of God, he's trying to convince us of something. I want to suggest that in two ways. He's trying to suggest to you that you are included, that you are not outside his love, that it can embrace and indwell you, that it can give you the strength you need to continue one day at a time, sometimes one moment at a time, as you rest in and trust in God's love and power at work in your life. And then it is to stretch you, to look around and see maybe the people you related to the least, the people maybe you even know the least, or maybe even there people that you look at and don't want to know because of some brokenness within you and he wants you to recognize the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love includes *them*, includes those people. And if that's true, then the word of God that we're called to hear and do includes our loving those people.

So a part of what we want God to do in us is to expand our love, expand our compassion, to strengthen it, such that we see beyond our prejudice, that we see beyond our brokenness and our past experiences to see people as those for whom Christ died and who God loves. People, whom we by the power of the spirit at work within us, are called to also demonstrate love. I've had a few members over my years as a pastor, when in moments especially that they were particularly frustrated with me, often because they didn't like a decision that I made, because I didn't, get this, listen to them, which actually means that I didn't agree with them and that the church ultimately decided to do what they didn't want to be done. They have often said to me this, "I love you. I just don't like you." Let me suggest to you that if there are people you love but don't like, that the spirit still has some work to do in your soul. God still needs to deepen and strengthen and broaden his love in you, so that you will both love and like them. It doesn't mean you like what they do. It doesn't mean you like the choices they make. It means you see the hand and work of God in them and recognize that they are greater than their behavior, that they are greater than and more valuable than the mistakes they've made or the wrong ideas they have. You might even notice that they weren't the ones that were wrong, if you know what I mean.

Now it says as God deepens this love in the church, as he builds our life on his word, and as he deepens our understanding of his love and our expression of his love, now to him, and this is

who he is, the one who is able to do abundantly far beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that is work within us, the one whom we glorify, the one whom we give credit, the one who we seek to honor is the one who is able by the power of that spirit that is within us to do exceedingly abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine.

As a leader in the church, this is what I learned from these verses. I can't out-dream God. I can't envision as far as God is able to take us. So, as we think about who we're called to be and what we're called to do, we need to recognize that it is too small. Let me explain that just a little bit. Have you ever been involved in the life of the church where they've made a decision to try to do something and then they failed because they didn't get adequate resources to pull it off? Somebody who tried to build the house and couldn't finish it is the biblical story. Have any of you ever actually experienced that in the life of the church where a council reached too far and the church failed to meet? I saw a couple of hands just barely go up. Here's the thing. I'm not saying that whatever we set our minds to God will allow us to do and more. I'm saying this. Whatever we set our minds to, whatever goal it is that we prayerfully set for the church, God is able to do that and far more. Don't ever think that you're stretching the resources of God because he's able to take it far more than we could ever ask or imagine. It doesn't mean we're always right. It doesn't mean we will never fail, but it's never for a lack of resources from God, our Father. He does, in fact, have the power to do that.

Then, of course, I love the way this verse ends. For a lot of years, I missed it. For a lot of years, as the prayer came to a conclusion, what I heard was "to him be glory in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever." I told you I've lived with the verse for a long time. I've quoted it. I prayed it. I've lived in it. Too often, I misquoted it. And I said again "to him be glory in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever" and what's missing? What did I skip? "**in the church.**" Brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to understand that God makes his power known, that God is glorified and honored *in the church*, among the people of God, in and through our relationship and interactions and sharing and support and prayer. We are the church and God's power is at work in and through us, to God be the glory.

When I first connected to the call committee a couple of years ago, as we were talking about the possibility and wondering if maybe God was calling me to be a pastor here at Saint Timothy's, the staff and the call committee and the leadership council were studying a book called "Growing Young." It's a study done by Fuller Seminary that talks about the importance of young people. Now, Chris Amey, I know that you are now an adult. Thanks be to God! Praise the Lord! Eighteen years old. Rah! Some people will still call you young. I don't know if you've noticed that. Especially older siblings. You will always be young to them. But the truth is this. God is at work in the church today, through young people, through the youngest of our people. His gifts, his love shines in them. They absolutely matter to him and I think we see that acknowledged by Paul in his prayer when he says "to all generations." If you can't motivate yourself to get along for your own sake, if you can't motivate yourself to love others for their sake, then maybe you can motivate yourself to love others for the sake of our children and grandchildren. Because, indeed, they need to see the power of God to transform our hearts to love those that we don't yet like, so that God is glorified even in the hearts of the little ones among us. Thanks be to God. Amen.