

Rooted and Grounded in Love

Jeremiah 17:5-8 Eph.3:14-21

We're going to spend the next 4 Sundays (the month of November, up until the start of Advent) in the book of Ephesians—the heart of it: four central passages in chapters 3, 4, and 5 which are the heart of the book. The entire epistle of Ephesians has been described as the heart of the gospel, or “the gospel within the gospel” because it provides a rich summary of the good news, the grace of God, and solid principles for living a life that is grounded in love, guided by faith in a gracious God, and beneficial for the world in which we live.

For the time in which we live—this moment in history—I found gems of wisdom, truth, and guidance in this central part of Ephesians. We're going to need grounding, and guidance, for the days ahead (and by “days” I mean weeks and months!). Because there will be post-election challenges. And opportunities, as we, God's people, seek to choose to live in faithfulness in a changing, tumultuous society.

Quick summary of Ephesians: Chapters 1-3 contain the apostle Paul's gushing about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. God has done this, and this, and this. And Paul doesn't try to explain any of it with elaborate theological

explanations. He simply gushes amazement and wonder. We might call the first three chapters the “Wow!” section.

Chapters 4-6 we could call the “now” section. Now... here is how to *live and act* in response to the “wow” of what God has done, and continues to do, for us. I’ll be spending the next three weeks in that section, because we are going to need some guidance after Tuesday’s election on how we choose to live and act. But before we get to that, this morning, we’re going to focus on what is perhaps one of my favorite passages of Scripture.

This morning’s passage concludes the “wow” part of Ephesians. And this conclusion of the “wow” section is in the form of a prayer, and it contains beautiful affirmations, and ends with a grand exclamation point.

Like all of 1-3, I’m not sure this is to be studied as much to be prayed thru and taken in, like taking in a great song or symphony. Here is Eph.3:14-21

For this reason (the reason being, the riches of God’s grace being lavished on us), I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him 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 the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen

This is the word of the Lord.

British mountaineer George Mallory was once asked, “Why do you want to climb Mount Everest?” And his famous 3-word answer was, “Because it’s there.”

The mountain for him, like for many others, had this mysterious draw and attraction, partly because it’s just so dang huge. And like any mountain, the closer you get to it the bigger it becomes. And the more detailed, exquisite, fascinating, and beautiful. One could spend a lifetime exploring a mountain and never see or know all of it.

To our knowledge Ephesians is one of Paul’s last letters, and all of his last letters are written from a prison cell (he is imprisoned because he proclaimed Jesus Christ as Lord, and not Caesar as Lord; he got into good trouble as John Lewis used to call it). So he’s an older man as he’s writing these prison letters, and he’s been through a lot! And it’s worth noting that for Paul, the farther along he travelled in his journey of faith—closer to *God* so to speak—the larger God became to him. The more interesting God became to him. The more multifaceted, and more mysterious. Read Eph.1-3 and see that he uses the word “mystery” several times. So for Paul, the closer he got to God, the more he

discovered how deep God's love is; and how much of a mystery God is. This is not like a Sherlock Holmes mystery where you follow clues until all questions are answered and that mystery is solved. But mystery in its true meaning: something too deep to fully and completely comprehend, and wrap our minds around. My favorite definition of mystery, though, is that mystery something you can *endlessly* understand.

It's like astronomy: the more time we spend looking into space, especially deep space, the more amazed we become, the more we learn and, and, the more questions are raised. And, therefore, the more we then want to learn and explore! It's something we can *endlessly* understand.

Same with the ocean (bring it back to planet earth). The more we explore it, the less we realize we know—even though we're learning more. It's a mind bender. According to NOAA we have only discovered 5% of what is contained in the earth's oceans. They believe that at least two thirds of all animal species on the planet are in the oceans and we have discovered less than one third of them, not to mention the plant life and other exotic undiscovered things that live in our seas. So, even the ocean is still a mystery to us. Something that we can *endlessly* understand. There is always more to learn and experience.

Whether we're star gazing or deep sea diving in our learning and exploring, it's the same kind of learning and exploring with the triune God. The more we grow in faith, the more we are in awe and wonder at who God is and what God does. Like George Mallory describing Mt. Everest, the closer you get to God, the bigger God becomes.

A few years ago I read the Lewis and Clark journals (I vicariously lived that adventure by reading their journals), and the same held true for them and their fellow sojourners: the farther along they got in their journey toward the west, the more fascinating it became for them. And the more difficult at times! They experienced rougher terrain, rugged mountain passes, inclement weather. There was exhaustion & fatigue. But oh how fascinating. And that's what kept them going. It was not boring! It was exciting. They couldn't wait for the next aha moment, and what lay over the next horizon. And what joy and elation they had when they got to the Pacific Ocean! It was worth the journey.

Again, that's similar to what it's like to grow in our relationship with God. It becomes more and more fascinating, and it can become more difficult at times as well. That's part of the deal, though. And Paul found that out too in his journey. After all, he is writing from prison, where he is going to live out his remaining days. His journey with God didn't necessarily get easier, but it always got more

interesting, and never boring. Read the book of Acts to see this as it chronicles Paul's journeys and experiences.

Whether life was pleasant and easy, or unpleasant and difficult, his view of God got bigger—especially the knowledge of God's love—its height and depth and breadth) *and*... his experience of God's power. Several times in this passage, and in all of his letters, Paul talks about God's power at work in and through us. In his letter to the Philippians he goes so far as to say that the same power from God that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is still at work in us and among us.

And so, Paul prays for us, that we would know and experience this power. First, according to our passage today, to strengthen us inwardly. He says "I pray that God grant you to be strengthened in your inner being with *power* from the Holy Spirit." The word 'strength' here means to be fortified, invigorated. It's the opposite of feeling insecure or unsure within yourself. This tells us that the Holy Spirit is the great maturing force in our life, who strengthens us, builds us up, invigorates us, builds confidence in us. It's a Christ-confidence that becomes self-confidence.

"Power to be strengthened in our inner being." What a wonderful statement. Who doesn't want inner strength? It's a prayer for us to have a solid, substantial peace and contentment in who we are. To be confident in who we

are; comfortable in our own skin because we know who we are, and whose we are, and that we are loved unconditionally by the Creator of the universe.

And Paul connects that power—power to be strengthened inwardly—with the power to comprehend God’s love in Jesus Christ, which, he says, is incomprehensible. He prays for us to know the love that is unknowable. That sounds like a paradoxical statement, but here we go with mystery again: something you can never *fully* comprehend, but *can* endlessly comprehend through meaningful experiences along the way.

And while he says “power to *comprehend* God’s love” or “*know*” God’s love, what he means is power to *experience* it, even though we’ll never completely understand it up here (in our brains). He is not praying that we cram our heads full of more *information* about God’s love, but that we have more and more *experiences* of God’s love, because we will never run out of opportunities to experience it in all its glory and vastness.

And he uses a couple of metaphors to encourage our living into this love: one is agricultural (“rooted”), and the other is construction related (“grounded” is the same word for the foundation of a building). Both “rooted” and “grounded” carry the idea of something that goes deep, and holds firm and steady that which is above the ground—the roots hold the tree, the foundation holds the building.

What Paul is saying: the root system of our life, the foundation of our life is God's love for us in Christ. Like Jesus said (John 15): abide in me; abide in my love. And in doing so, he says, you'll bear much fruit.

We need to be rooted and grounded in the love of God in Jesus Christ. We are easily tempted throughout our lives to root or ground our lives in other things like our job, or career, our family, money, our social life or other activities. Or, as we are seeing today, many have rooted and grounded their life in their ideology and political affiliation, or their activism.

And what Jesus and the apostle Paul so often tell us is, none of these are deep enough, strong enough, reliable enough to sustain us through all that life will bring over the years. Both Jesus in his teaching and Paul draw upon this image from Jeremiah 17: if we trust in human strength alone (ours or someone else's), we're like tumbleweed; if we trust in the Lord, we are like a strong tree, with roots sinking deep, able to withstand anything that comes our way, and able bear fruit no matter what comes our way.

And there is a lot coming our way these days! This metaphor of being rooted in love, and strengthened inwardly reminds me of the story that Howard Thurman told, about growing up in Florida, and during storms he would sit underneath an oak tree, with his back against the trunk, and watch the tree sway

in the wind. And he would pray to be made strong like that oak tree: deeply rooted, and able to withstand the storms of life, and of society.

We are rooted and grounded in love. Now, we may know that up here because the Bible says it, but my guess is that many of us have a hard time really believing it in our hearts, and living in that reality on a regular basis. Partly because we haven't *experienced* it, perhaps because we weren't taught to look for it or *try to* experience it. Because we were taught to *believe right doctrine*, and any personal mystical experience was seen as suspicious, or weird. Or, if we talked about God's love too much it was considered squishy or sentimental. Well, Jesus and Paul talked relentlessly about love and grace and all that, and they were anything but squishy and sentimental. They were fierce! In the best sense of that word.

They were able to believe in a very big God, and at the same time believe that this Creator-God-of-the-Universe is intimately involved in our lives, in love, to strengthen us, to keep us grounded, and... to (quote) "*fill you with all the fullness of God.*" What does that mean?!?! To fill you with all the fullness of God. How can a person be filled with ***all*** the ***fullness*** of God? That makes me think I'd explode if it actually happened! It sounds like it's too much. But I have to take it on faith that this not only *can* happen, but that God *wants* it to happen—to fill

you, and me, with God's fullness. Which probably has something to do with this inner strengthening, this comprehending the incomprehensible love of God, which keeps us grounded and steadied and bearing fruit, no matter what.

We're going to need this grounding, steady love in the weeks to come. Not just for our own sakes—for our health and our families—but so we can be strong, and stay strong, to continue to *be loving persons*, no matter what happens after Tuesday (or Wednesday, Thursday, Friday... However long it takes to sort this out).

Being rooted and grounded in love will help us to choose to love our neighbors... *and* love our enemies (we'll talk about that in a couple weeks). It will help us to choose to continue to love and serve our neighborhoods and community, and follow the Way of Christ in the world, no matter what.

Because... as Paul says in a final audacious statement about power: that God is able to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine, according to ***the power*** which is at work within us. Here is the third time he speaks of God's power, in this passage alone. These last lines of chapter 3, which bring this first half of the letter to a close, are Paul's grand ascription of praise, and affirmation of what God is able to do.

What Paul is telling us is: God's vision for our lives is larger than we think. God's vision for the church is larger than we think. God wants to do things we didn't expect, even beyond our prayer requests, exceedingly abundantly (not a little bit abundantly, but exceedingly abundantly), beyond what we can ask or imagine. I don't know about you, but I can imagine some pretty cool stuff. But my imagination is too limited. God wants to do more and greater things, better things. And not just for you and me, but for the world. Paul uses what Bible scholar John Stott calls a 'super superlative.' Chair Bible version (NRSV) says "abundantly far more." Other versions say "exceedingly abundantly;" and "infinitely more;" "immeasurably more." You get the idea.

I used to think these "exceedingly abundantly" verses meant that God wanted to prosper us, make us happier, fulfill us personally. But this isn't about fulfilling me or you, primarily (though I believe that can happen along the way). It's primarily about God wanting to deepen and strengthen us in his love, and in confidence, so that we can recognize our giftedness for service and become a blessing to others. So we can learn how to love others well. Which we will begin talking about next week.

Now, let us celebrate our rootedness, our groundedness, in God's love through Jesus Christ as we sing, and as we celebrate communion.