

A Prayer for the Church: Rooted and Grounded in Love

Ephesians 3:14-21

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Prayer: By the riches of your glory, strengthen us. By the power of your word and work, transform us. By the wisdom of your counsel, teach us. Direct our thoughts and actions that we may walk in communion with your Holy Spirit in this hour and through all of our days...

I wonder... if this is asking too much, if you think it is possible. Do you think that a congregation...with all its weaknesses and troubles and fears and misunderstanding ... can be filled with God? What about a regular church that then was challenged to live through a pandemic? Can Christ dwell with them, alongside their shortcomings, fears, mistakes and wishes for do-overs? If that were even possible...

This sermon is for those of you who might consider this. For those of you who think probably not... I want you to know, I respect your position. I do. And yet it has been given to me to, in the words of Emily Dickenson, to "dwell in possibility." And in this case, in this place, I'd like to invite you to consider possibilities...

Paul begins this passage, "...for this reason..." he is summarizing an argument he is making in this letter that the good news of Christ extends beyond Judaism to the gentiles. Which the Ephesians are. He is bringing it all to bear upon them, personally.

Paul prays for their heart; Paul prays for their mind; Paul gives them a benediction. That's a 3-point sermon!

1. Heart. Paul prays that they would be strengthened in their inner being...that "Christ would dwell in your hearts through faith." Having Christ dwell in your heart is like having a new person move into your household. If they're just visiting, it's all rather easy to accommodate a house guest; you simply offer hospitality and try to practice good manners. You might buy their favorite food, or accommodate an allergy, but these are temporary measures. But if someone moves in to stay, everything changes not all at once necessarily but over time, definitely. At first you might try to hold on to your familiar patterns and routines, but eventually they make their mark. They get included in those messier conversations around the house. (Those happening when you're tired, or hungry, frightened, or bored.) Relationships realign. Household tasks increase and responsibilities shift. So it is when Christ moves into the hearts of Christians. He is another person. Literally. If you love him, it is a joyful accommodation. Motivated by love, you may be happy to welcome him, but it still means you've got to move the furniture, change routines, and respect the new alliances. Love is the soil in which the seedling can grow. Love is the ground upon which the building will be constructed. Rooted and grounded in love is where Paul locates faith.
2. Paul prays for their mind. "...to know the love of Christ though it surpasses knowledge." To know something that cannot be fully known. It's an oxymoron. Immanuel Kant has taught us, "If there are limits to what reason can know, then whatever is beyond those

limits cannot be known by reason.” This is **why** Paul is praying for their mind. It’s limited. Which the mind does not always recognize. Knowledge is a tremendous tool, but it is a tool with limits, which need to be respected to keep it effective. In his letters Paul lists knowledge as one virtue among many – hope, love, charity, mercy, wisdom, knowledge, self-control, humility...and so forth. He says; “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 it’s a prayer for you to know something which is beyond knowing...which, some of you already know you know... although...its beyond knowing... others of you may know you’ll never know.

3. Doxology: Reason is not the only way to know things. The heart has its reasons and its own knowledge as well. When you knew you loved her, when you knew what you had to do, when you didn’t count the cost of doing the right thing... this is knowledge of the heart. When you did the right thing in the moment, so quickly you didn’t really think it through. This is a little closer to the faith that Paul is praying for. When the heart and the head come together with the indwelling of Christ.

It could mean:

- a commitment to social justice.
- amplifying voices of those who are vulnerable.
- providing a simple, welcome to all comers.
- maintaining a spiritual practice that allows for growth and joy.

If you study Paul, one of the things that comes clear is that he displays concern, alarmed concern, for the early churches. The Apostle, of blessed memory, was anxious for the early churches. They are facing in some cases hostile cultural forces, possible and actual persecution. They worry that they are getting older, those who remembered Jesus are dying off, and there aren’t enough young people joining... 2000 years ago... I have been working in Transition Ministries long enough now that I would have asked the Apostle himself...perhaps impertinently, “so...Paul, where is God in this for you? What role does faith have?”

And that’s the question behind this prayer for the church. How are we bringing heart and mind together in faith? Can we take faith into our future? Can it apply now? Given everything that has happened already, given everything that could still?

Conclusion:

Paul has mixed metaphors here in describing the early church, “rooted” in love is an organic image – that love is the root of the church -- the underground strength of its flourishing and blooming. “Grounded” in love is more of an architectural image, love is our grounding or foundation. Like the ground floor of a building provides its base of stability. The ancient world was much less critical of mixed metaphors than we are. So don’t hold that against Paul. He’s encouraging us deeper as we bring head and heart, the past and the future, together in our spiritual practice.

What if, when they laid the foundation of this church, after the old one burned down and they began to build this building, again, what if they laid it in love? What if, when you woke up this

morning, the love of God held you, supported you, redeemed you? What if justice is rolling down with the rain outside? What if we are being redeemed even now?

I wonder if you think it is possible that with the people gathered here variously, this morning, and online, something might shift beneath you, and you remember the faith that has been rooted in your soul, grounding your spirit, since before you can remember -- rooted and grounded in love.

I wonder... if this is asking too much, if you think it is possible. Bringing the head and the heart together in prayer and action. Do you think that a congregation...with all its weaknesses and troubles and fears and misunderstanding ... can be filled with God? Can Christ dwell with them, among them, within them; alongside the covid19 protocols, the online services, the crazy weather we've been having, the parking lot security, the gifts from generations past, and the responsibilities for the future?

All we really have to work with is faith and one another. Some of them wondered... if having faith and each other is really enough; others of them knew...it was all they ever had...

Dear reader: here is a quote that I thought about while I was writing this sermon. I'm almost persuaded by it. What about you? With love, EWA

"that God's power may be seen at work in the church in which Gods' fullness dwells by the presence of Christ and the Spirit... Christ and his congregation are not two separate entities but are so closely conjoined that it would be permissible to write of one corporate whole."¹

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¹ *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, Ralph P Martin; John Knox Press 1991, pp. 45