

“Rooted and Grounded”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
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Ephesians 3: 14-21

Have you ever received a note or letter from someone that came at just the right time? Maybe it was after the death of a loved one, and a friend sent you a card with words that spoke the comfort you needed at that time. Maybe it was during a challenging period in your life, and someone close to you wrote words that gave you strength to keep going. Maybe it was a note following up on a recent conversation with someone, and the words gave you a sense of connection with that person.

I remember several years ago, I had been asked to serve on a presbytery task force to study our staffing model. After a lot of discussion, focus groups, and hard work, we presented our recommendations to the presbytery. I was the lucky one who got to make that presentation, and the presbytery did not react too well to what we recommended. It had nothing to do with me – it had everything to do with what the larger group was feeling: anxiety over losing staff members. I took the brunt of the body’s angst, and I walked out of that meeting feeling tired, dejected and frankly, a bit mad.

Early the following week, I got a note in the mail from Glen Bell. At the time, Glen was the pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis; he now pastors a church in Sarasota, Florida. The note was not long, but it was sincere and straight-forward. He knew what I had been feeling, and thanked me for remaining forthright and steady in the midst of such anxiety. And his words reassured me that in the long-run, the presbytery would see the merit of what we were proposing. That note from Glen came at just the right time, and in a way was God speaking to me, too. When we go through times of struggle or upheaval, God is going to speak to us in some way to give us a footing – all we have to do is listen with open ears, minds, and hearts.

When I first read this passage from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, it sounded like a pastor or friend writing words of encouragement to a struggling church. This passage is Paul’s earnest prayer for the church in Ephesus, and it reflects a theme throughout the letter of concern and encouragement in the form of prayer. In 1:15-23, Paul begins a prayer for the Ephesians: “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him . . .” (1:17). But just as soon as Paul begins his prayer, he moves on to flesh out issues of theology, and never gets back around to concluding his prayer. That is, until he gets to chapter three.

And from the very beginning, Paul sets a tone that is humble and heart-felt. For the Ephesians, he gets down on his knees before God, “from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.” If you read that in a note or letter from someone else, how would that make you feel? I can only imagine it would have touched the readers deeply to know that this man who meant so much to them was down on his knees asking God to be with them in remarkable ways.

Then, Paul offers three petitions on behalf of the Ephesians, each of which are prefaced by, “I pray that.” First, Paul prays that they “may be strengthened in your inner being with the power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” Earlier in this letter, Paul remarks about how the Ephesians have changed dramatically through the power of God (2:1). But in this petition, Paul carries that theme further, reminding the Ephesians that if they are to continue to grow, they must be “rooted and grounded in love.”

Second, Paul prays that they “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.” One commentator notes: *Here the prayer for growth takes on specificity in the request for understanding and for love. To comprehend “what is the breadth and length and height and depth” is surely to understand all that – and more than – human beings can indeed comprehend. Even beyond that knowledge, however, lies the love of Christ, beyond the very frontier of the human capacity for knowledge* (*Texts for Preaching, Year B*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 1993: 444). In other words, it is one thing to have the love of Christ dwell in your heart; but it is another thing to comprehend that knowledge of love and act upon it. That is Paul’s prayer: that they might grow in ways only God could create and allow.

Finally, in light of this knowledge of God’s love, Paul prays that the Ephesians “may be filled with all the fullness of God.” In a sense, it is as if Paul is summarizing his prayer by referring to the very beginning. The fullness of God is “from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.” The fullness of God is to know “the breadth and length and height and depth.” And, as the doxology of the last two verses says, the fullness of God is “the power at work within us [that] is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” If we are filled with the fullness of God, we will then experience the depth of God’s love in Jesus Christ.

What would it mean to you and me if this letter of Paul has been written directly to us? What would it mean if we heard someone say they were down on their knees praying to God that we would be rooted and grounded in God’s love? What would it feel like to know that the trials and challenges and joys and sorrows we experience were being

lifted up by someone in prayer? How would it feel to receive a letter – a prayer – like this in the mail?

As I often do, I am drawn to the imagery of plants which Paul utilizes here: “as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” A plant requires rich, fertile soil, no rocks, and lots of sun and water if it is to flourish and grow. While it may grow at first very quickly, it will only continue to grow – through storms and droughts – if it is grounded and cared for by its caretaker.

What better analogy is there for us in the Christian life? I have witnessed too many times people who come off of a spiritual high, thinking life is better than anything they could imagine – only to crash in the depths of despair, for they had no spiritual roots, grounded in the love of Christ. I have seen young adults struggle with the strains of life, and the ones who seem to persevere are the ones who have had some grounding in the soil of Christ’s love. I have witnessed men and women go through tremendous adversity, and the only means by which they seem to come through it all is because of the fullness of God that dwells in them.

How might we share that message in our life as the church? When we notice someone has been gone for some time from the community of faith, perhaps we send a note of encouragement or make a phone call to reconnect them. When we wrestle with our frustrations over how something is going to get done, perhaps we stop and pray and ask God to show us how “to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” When we look at ourselves and feel we are doing all we need to do as Christ’s disciples, perhaps we consider whether we truly comprehend the depth and height and length and breadth of what God requires of us.

As we continue to grow as God’s children, may we remember the power of prayer. It is a gift from God that can transform us and remind us of how deeply we are rooted in God’s love in Jesus Christ. May that love shape us and turn us into the disciples we are called to be – today, tomorrow, and for all of our days.

Thanks be to God. Amen.