

This article, written by a Bible college classmate of mine, is offered with his permission for your consideration. It is a condensed version of a sermon he preached by the same title and was featured in "Once Delivered," (July 2012), his quarterly publication. Mark Joy is a graduate of Central Christian College of the Bible and has been for many years a professor at Jamestown College in ND.

ROOTED AND GROUNDED

My father often said, "I don't do things by halves." When he did something, he wanted it done, as permanent as reasonably possible, and not needing further attention. When we built a decorative rail fence in our yard in Claycomo, Missouri, the end post near the curbside was set in 40" of concrete. Understand, this was a simple decorative fence, not something that needed to hold in a bull or bear the stress of tightly-strung wires.

While dad's fencepost might be an example of overkill, there is something to be said for laying down a firm foundation, or having deep roots. Paul uses both of these metaphors in Ephesians 3:16-17, where he tells the Ephesian Christians:

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 his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. (NRSV)

Paul uses a similar mixture of metaphors in Colossians 2:7:

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. (NRSV)

We live in a time of rootlessness. In the physical sense, how many of us have family scattered over the map of the United States, or even over the globe? I believe my mother's parents lived their entire lives in Nodaway county, Missouri, and my mother and father never lived more than 120 miles from the towns where they were born. Beyond the sense of rootlessness in location or physical place, we suffer from an emotional and intellectual rootlessness. The kind of post-modern, New Age relativism espoused by many people is really just a refusal to stake any claim to believe in or trust anything, and not surprisingly it leaves them feeling empty and unfulfilled. They have no roots, so it is no wonder they wither away when times of trial come. Even Christians, who are supposed to be rooted and grounded in God's love, often have a trust or dependence on that love that is too shallow. The German theologian Helmut Thielicke said that the source of our spiritual disease "is not in the branches of our nerves at all but rather in our roots which are stunted and starved."¹

¹ Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), p. 65.

A building needs a solid foundation for the structure to rest on stably. A tree needs a network of roots for nourishment. While the purposes differ, the end result is similar--what is above, what is visible, depends on that solid grounding. In Psalm 1:3, it says that the righteous "are like trees, planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither." (NRSV). Those of us who live in the flatlands of the northern prairie and the Great Plains know what is meant a tree by a stream of water. Before settlers planted trees in much of North Dakota, there simply weren't any in the grasslands except for those along streams or near sloughs. Like the old Texas cowboy said about the Plains, "If there's a tree, and it ain't on a river or a creek, then it ain't there." A kind of convoluted way of putting it, but true nevertheless.

In his classic book *A Celebration of Discipline*, Richard J. Foster says "The desperate need today is not for a great number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people."² We often seem to consider "deep" in a context like this as synonymous with intelligent or gifted, but they are not the same qualities or traits. Most of us can readily think of examples of very intelligent people we know who focus their intelligence on pretty superficial things. On the other hand, I have met mature Christians who may not have been highly intelligent yet they impressed me as being very deep--knowing what life was about, focused on the most important things, and abiding in a simple, profound trust in God and His Word. They were deep, because they were firmly rooted and grounded in God's love.

One of my professors at Central Christian College of the Bible was L. Edsil Dale. He used to tell us that we would face times of crisis and trial in our lives. At times like that, he said, you need something to hold on to. "Set down some fenceposts," Professor Dale said. Set down something solid that you can hold on to, when the storms of life come thrashing against you. Edsil Dale was a little older than my father, and I imagine he would have understood why my dad built that fence the way he did.

Paul urges us to be rooted and grounded in God's love. But to build our lives on that love, we need to know about and come to understand it, as much as it is possible for us to understand. Where do we learn about God's love? In His Word, and among the community of His people. If we are rooted and grounded in God's love, Paul says, then we can "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." (Ephesians 3:18, 19 NRSV, emphasis added). With the Word of God and with the community of the faithful, we come to experience and understand the love of God. As John Wesley said, there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. In the storms and trials that we face in life, we need to find a firm foundation on the love of God, and we need the community of God's people to help us know that love and how it can form and shape our lives.

² Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. 20th Anniversary Edition. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998), p. 1.