

Sermon

“Can You Imagine?”

February 9th, 2020 – First Presbyterian Church

5th Sunday after Epiphany

Based on Psalm 103:1-18 and Ephesians 3:14-21

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 103:1-18

1 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. 2 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—3 who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, 4 who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, 5 who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. 6 The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. 7 He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. 8 The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. 9 He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. 10 He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. 13 As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. 14 For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. 15 As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; 16 for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. 17 But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, 18 to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

New Testament Lesson: Ephesians 3:14-21

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 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, 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 20 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, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Prayer: Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Sermon: Can You Imagine?

Our text this morning is perhaps one of my favorites, if a pastor is allowed to have favorites. I mean it's no she-bears attacking disrespectful teenagers or David's mighty men standing against the Philistine army, or Ehud, the left-handed man who plunges his knife into the stomach of his enemy only to have it disappear into the man's fat.

Meaning, our text might not win any Oscars for its drama or humor, but it holds a certain power for its original audience and for us today.

As a whole the book of Ephesians was written to believers for the purpose of encouraging them in their faith...it was meant to be a reminder of who they were in Christ, and then to challenge them to live differently in the world because of that identity.

We don't know all the details about the church in Ephesus or the exact reasons why Paul wrote this particular letter. But we know it was written to a group of early believers who, like the early church as a whole, were trying to discover what it meant for them to now be Christians. How did they go from being Gentiles and Jews who didn't interact with one another, to being one church called by God into the world? How did they go from those who were once far off, removed from God's promises, to being the heirs of that promise?

Put simply, the church in Ephesus was trying to figure out who they were and what God was calling them to do and who God was calling them to be. The challenge was, they didn't always know what the next day was going to hold. It might include persecution from the Roman Empire. Or it might include welcoming a new person, whether a Jew or a Gentile, into their midst. Or it might involve a false teacher showing up. Or it might involve an argument amongst themselves about God's promises.

And so, Ephesians was written to encourage these believers, no matter what came their way. Our text this morning, which serves as a sort of transition in the book of Ephesians. For three chapters Paul has been reminding this church of who they are and he is about to teach them how then they are called to live. But first Paul offers a prayer.

In most Bibles, our text has been titled simply "Paul's Prayer for the Ephesians"...and it's just that. It is Paul's heartfelt prayer for a church that he knows and loves but that is facing an uncertain and unknown future.

And so, it is where I chose to turn in our own weeks of in between time. Now don't get me wrong, we know that Neeley is coming in eight days and I for one am excited about her arrival and not just because I want a buddy to yell across the hall to...

But no matter how certain we are about the facts of Neeley's arrival, there remains many unknowns. What will the future hold for our church? How might we be challenged and changed as we move forward? What will it be like to have an all-female staff? How will the community look at us and view us? What will it be like to gather for worship and then go back into the world to which we have been called?

And we might feel that uncertainty as excitement or as anxiety or perhaps even as fear. And so, I believe that just as Paul's prayer once offered a message of hope and encouragement to the church in Ephesus, so also can it offer the same to us today.

Paul begins his prayer saying, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name." Paul begins with a look back to what he has been teaching the church in Ephesus in the first three chapters of his letter.

And it's really quite simple...there is no nation, clan, or family, that is there is no person, who is beyond the love of God.

Now, that might sound like an obvious claim to make here in a church on a Sunday morning. But I know, that there are people who stay far away from the church, and perhaps even some in this room, who believe that their secret hurt, private shame, or lost hope somehow means that they are beyond the love of God.

But Paul begins his prayer with a reminder that we all need to hear at one time or another, there is no one who is beyond the love of God, and so no matter the situation before us, it is always God who can help. There is no one and no situation that is outside the love offered to us by God through Christ.

It is this knowledge of God's love that provides the foundation for the rest of Paul's prayer.

And so Paul begins his first petition saying, "I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love."

Simply put, Paul's prayer is that we might be strengthened in our inner being rather than being strengthened in ourselves.

We know all too well that we are at risk of living a life that is rooted and grounded in fear and self-preservation rather than in Christ. As the church, perhaps that's fear about money or staff or building needs. Or perhaps it's fear of change and something new.

Because our human instinct is often to turn to self-preservation, aiming to keep things just as they are because that feels safe. But Paul prays that we might be stripped of the things we so often use to build ourselves up, the things we use to protect ourselves...whether that be our money, belongings, jobs, family, or success. And instead Paul prays that we would know a strength that comes only from Christ.

Meaning, we don't have to be strong in ourselves, we are not the ones who carry the weight of our lives or of the church. It is not our responsibility to hold the future in our hands.

That is the work of God and God alone. And so, Paul prays that we would know this truth in hearts and our souls, so much so that we might be "rooted and grounded in love."

While I make no claims about my gardening skills, I know enough to know this...that plants need roots in order to flourish and thrive. In particular, trees need roots that not only provide the nutrients they need to survive, but also ground them when the storms come.

Among my most distinct memories of my time in seminary was walking outside the morning after Hurricane Sandy passed through. Amongst the damage around our apartments were downed trees...some of the trees had literally snapped or broken at the trunk. But other trees had fallen, bringing their roots, and the sidewalks, along with them.

And so wherever you went, you were reminded about how powerful the hurricane winds truly were. They were strong enough that even trees with a full and healthy root system were literally brought down. But those roots were so strong that when pulled from the ground, they also brought the concrete with them. Those are the kind of roots Paul prays that the people might have.

Paul knows that the church in Ephesus will be challenged, they will experience persecution from the outside and discord from within, but he prays that through it all they would know the love of Christ and so be changed from the inside out.

And then Paul continues to his second petition, “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.”

If Paul’s first intercession is that the church may experience the love of God in its heart and soul, then this second intercession is that the church comes to grasp in its intellect, or its mind, that God’s grace is utterly massive and awesome beyond adequate imagining.

In my summers working at camp the kids had a favorite song called Everlasting Love...its verses were quite simple...your everlasting love is higher than the skies, your everlasting love is deeper than the seas, and your everlasting love is reaching out to me. But the real thrill of the song came when we let the kids make up their own verses. And so what is God’s everlasting love like...taller than the pine trees, stronger than Sasquatch, mightier than the Hulk, brighter than the sun.

We know that God’s love is beyond anything we can truly put words to, but Paul prays that we might begin to comprehend just how broad and long and high and deep God’s love truly is.

Paul’s prayer is full of hope that God’s people, that the Church, might look different from the rest of the world...and he prays that as Christ takes over us and takes over the Church that we might comprehend that which is above all knowledge, the vastness of the love of Christ. And Paul prays that as we come to know this love that we will be filled with the fullness of God. That the love we experience from God will then overflow into the world around us.

Because what Paul’s prayer ultimately comes down to is whether or not we’re going to let Christ into our very being to change us.

Think about this way...say there is a new person in your household. Now, if they’re just visiting, it’s all fairly easy...you offer hospitality and try to practice your best manners. And then, soon enough, they are gone and things simply return to normal.

But if that person moves in to stay, say when you get married, everything changes. At first you might try to hold on to your familiar patterns and routines, forcing the new member to accommodate you and stay out of your way.

But that's impossible, eventually they make their mark. Conversations change. Relationships realign. Household chores increase. Responsibilities shift. And suddenly you find yourself watching soccer on a Saturday morning...

It reminds me of the Harry Potter series, where the Dursley family, Harry's aunt, uncle, and cousin, have allowed Harry to live in their house, but given him only the cupboard under the stairs. They don't want him, or anything he does, to impact their family or their way of life, and so they keep him away from everything important...going as far as leaving him at home for birthday celebrations or locking him in the cupboard when guests come over. But the thing is, it never actually works.

Now it's humorous in the novels, when Harry's magical powers still manage to appear in spite of the Dursley's best efforts to hide him, but their experience also highlights the thing that we all know to be true...if we truly let someone into our lives then somethings will have to change.

And that's true in our lives of faith as well...when we allow Christ to truly dwell in our hearts...there is no mere tweaking of old patterns, instead everything must change.

Because if we let Christ dwell in our hearts, if we truly comprehend the vastness of God's love, then we can't help but be changed by it...and that change isn't just about our individual lives, but it is also about our communal life...how we interact with one another and how we interact with our community and the world.

And when I think about Neeley's arrival, and the exciting things that are ahead for us as a congregation, I know that things are going to be different. As we welcome Neeley and her leadership in this place things are going to change.

And we all know that change isn't always easy. And we don't necessarily even like change.

But it is my prayer, that as we begin a new chapter of our life together, we might first of all find confidence in our experience and knowledge of God's love for us and for the Church. So that with that confidence, we can welcome Neeley and her leadership with energy and excitement.

Because we know that things change, but we also know that the love offered to us by God through Christ will never change. And it is the foundation upon which we build our lives, individually and collectively. Knowing that, the only challenge that remains is taking the next step into our future together.

In 1910 Theodore Roosevelt gave a speech where he is quoted saying, “It is not the critic who counts; not the one who points out how the strong one stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the one who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but they who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends themselves in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if they fail, at least fails while daring greatly.”

And so perhaps the challenge for us today is to step out into the arena...to be willing to get dirty, and sweaty, and perhaps even a little bloody...to be a church who strives to know the extent of God’s love. Who understands what it means to have Christ dwell in our hearts, and so who is changed. Who comprehends the vastness of God’s love and is transformed from the inside out. Who lets that love overflow into the world.

It won’t necessarily be easy, my friends. That has never been the promise of following God. But armed with the love of God and the community of believers we have surrounded ourselves with, we can step out and dare greatly.

And then, as if Paul intimately understands the challenges facing not just the church in Ephesus but also the church today, he ends his prayer saying, “Now to God 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 glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.”

Because at first glance the task seems almost impossible. Is it really possible that a congregation, with all its weaknesses and troubles and fears and misunderstanding can be filled with God, indwelt by Christ? Can a congregation truly be changed by the power of God’s love?

And Paul’s answer is absolutely yes! Because it is God who is at work.

Left on our own, there’s not much we can do for ourselves, but with God, we are invited to imagine the possibilities.

And let me tell you this, God is at work in me. God is at work in you. God is at work in Neeley. And God is at work in this place. The massive, holy power of God is present even in our fumbling attempts to live faithfully, lovingly and courageously in the face of uncertainty and new beginnings.

Our only responsibility is to get ready, to jump in, and to be part of what God is going to do. The rest is up to God.

And so, then our daring prayers are not asking too much. Because God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.

Thanks be to God. Amen