

## **Rooted and Grounded in Love**

**1John 4:16-19      Eph.3:14-21**

*For this reason 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 him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen*

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. Hold that thought.

To our knowledge Ephesians is one of Paul’s last letters. So he’s an older man as he’s writing these letters from prison, 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. I just read a few verses from the end of chapter 3, but if you read all of Eph.1-3 in one sitting you'll see that he uses the word "mystery" several times. So for Paul, the closer he got to God, the more he discovered how vast God's love is; and how much of a mystery God is. Not like a Sherlock Holmes mystery where you follow clues until all questions are answered and the it's solved. But mystery in its true meaning: something too deep to fully and completely comprehend. My favorite definition of mystery is: something you can *endlessly* understand.

It's like astronomy: the more time you spend looking into space, especially deep space, the more amazed you become and the more questions you have and the more mysterious it is to you. And, the more you want to learn and explore! We're discovering new things all the time.

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. According to NOAA we have only explored 5% of 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 those, 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. And to not ruin on our way to learning more about it!

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

A few years ago I read the Lewis and Clark journals. I vicariously lived their adventure of journeying to discover the west and in search of the Pacific Ocean, and it occurred to me that *their* journey of discovery is an allegory for *our* journey of faith: the farther along they got in their journey, the more fascinating it became for them. And the more difficult at times! They experienced rougher terrain, rugged mountain passes, inclement weather, new tribes of Native Americans. 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 discovery of a new plant species or animal species, 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, comparisons can be made to what it's like to grow in our relationship with God. It becomes more and more fascinating and joyful, 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 is going to live out his remaining days. His journey with God didn't necessarily get easier, but it always got more interesting, and more fulfilling. As we read the book of Acts and his letters, we see that.

Whether life was pleasant and easy, or unpleasant and difficult, his view of God got bigger—especially the knowledge of God's love, which he says is unmeasurable.

This passage is all about growing in—being rooted and grounded in—God's love. Yet, while love is the main point and emphasis, three times in this passage Paul talks about power. Power, mainly, 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 'strengthened' here means to be fortified, invigorated. The opposite of feeling insecure or unsure within yourself. The Holy Spirit is the great maturing force in our life, who strengthens us, builds us up, invigorates us,

builds confidence in us. This isn't arrogance or pride. Arrogance is being full of myself. Paul is talking about being full of the Holy Spirit. Now *that's* strength!

"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.

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. To know the love that is unknowable. That sounds like a contradiction, but here we go with mystery again (or paradox): something you can never *fully* comprehend, but *can* apprehend in meaningful experiences along the way, in accumulating measure.

And while he says "power to *know* God's love," what he means is power to *experience* it, even though we'll never completely understand it up here (head). 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 variety and depth.

And he uses two metaphors to encourage our living into this love: rooted and grounded. One is agricultural (“rooted”), and the other is construction related (“grounded” is the same word for the foundation of a building). Both carry the idea of something that goes or grows *underground*, 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.

And we *need* to be rooted and grounded in the love of God in Christ. We are easily tempted throughout our lives to root or ground our lives in other things or people. But we need something deep enough, strong enough, reliable enough to sustain us through all that life will bring over the years. Especially today, with all that’s going on. We need a solid grounding in love, to bring us calm, peace, and to help us weather the challenges before us, whether personal challenges collective challenges.

As we face these challenges and work through them, think of this big God and his love and power that are spoken of here, and perhaps this week read Eph.3:14-21 and offer your hardship, your stress, your fatigue, or whatever, to God in light of what is said in this passage. Do it every day. I think we’ll find that

the hardship or stress will begin to recede into the background, and God's love will begin to take center stage, become the focus, and the other things will seem smaller in light of God's "bigness." It doesn't mean the challenges will go away. It does mean that we will experience inner strengthening, and come to realize that we are held by love.

We are rooted and grounded in love. 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 daily basis. Partly because we just haven't *experienced* it regularly, or we weren't taught to *try to* experience it. But mostly, because we have had it drummed into our heads that we're sinners.

And I think that is the primary way that most Christian adults think of themselves, if not consciously then subconsciously. That's what many preachers have told their congregations. We're sinners. In other words, the subtle or not so subtle message has been, we are rooted and grounded in sin (or substitute whatever word fits for "not worthy"). And although the message has been "Jesus came to save us," I'm not sure we ever got fully transplanted into new soil—the soil of God's love. We still had it in our hearts (and perhaps still, our heads) that we're sinners. Even if we've been Christians for most of our lives.

And I want to get it into our heads and hearts that we are not rooted and grounded in sin. We are not “sinners.” That is not how the Bible sees or defines you. There are only a handful of places where the term “sinner” is used, and when it appears it is almost always used hyperbolically or symbolically (for example, in a parable, to make a point) or pejoratively. For example, when the Pharisees are trying to accuse Jesus of being a not-very-holy man, they say, “He eats with tax collectors and... sinners.” That’s a derogatory label. Jesus himself never used that word to describe any person, and when he talked to people he either called them friend or he called them by their name.

“Sinner” is not how God sees you or defines you. We need to get away from that kind of self-talk or self-definition (I’m a sinner, or I’m a failure, or I’m not worthy). The Bible says *we have sinned*; it’s something we’ve *done*, and sometimes still do. But it’s not *who we are*. Who we are is beloved children of God. And, saints! That’s what he calls you. Paul begins all of his letters with the greeting: “To the saints at... Ephesus” (or Corinth, etc). Not, “to the sinners at...” And in verse 18 of our passage this morning he prays that we would have power to comprehend, with all the *saints*, the expansiveness of God’s love. He doesn’t say, “...with all the sinners.”

That's how God and Scripture define us—as saints, who are rooted and grounded in the love of a big God, whose love is vast and incomprehensible. Imagine how that would change how people think and act if we all thought and acted from a place of understanding ourselves as beloved, not as sinner. And perhaps you already do, and if you do, good on you! But my experience over the years is that many, if not most, church members don't believe that about themselves, and therefore don't believe it about others. No wonder we struggle with our relationships sometimes.

We are saints! We are beloved by our heavenly Mother, our heavenly Father.

Think of it this way: what parent would consider their child a failure, from birth, or call them that? Of course children will fail as they grow, because they're trying new things and experimenting as they grow. And in some ways, it's the same with adults. Life continues to be a series of trials and errors as we continue to grow. But the errors don't define us. The journey's trajectory, over time, is what matters, and our base identity as beloved. Just like Lewis and Clark. They got lost from time to time, got stuck, things broke down, and they ran into the Rocky Mountains when they didn't expect them (didn't know they were there!).

But the breakdowns and errors didn't define the journey; the discoveries did, and the joy of getting where they intended to go.

What defines us is not our failures or our sins, but our rootedness and groundedness in love. As I like to say, failure is not fatal, it's directional. Even more than that, what defines us is who we are in God, our uniqueness, each of us, as persons created in God's image, our giftedness, the ways we bless others with who we are, as God strengthens us in love.