

Sermon 8-09-09<sup>1</sup>

Psalm 34

Ephesians 3:14-21

Being Rooted and Grounded in Love

When I arrived at Pittsburgh Seminary in the fall of 2004, I was not exactly the happiest camper in the world. It had nothing to do with my classmates, they were very personable, nor did it have to do with being in Pittsburgh because I loved being closer to my family and friends. No, when I arrived at Pittsburgh Seminary, I was disappointed for one reason and one reason only: it wasn't Princeton. You see, in my last two years at Westminster I was being groomed for Princeton Seminary by my advisor, he and I had such high hopes, which is why that dream came crashing down when I didn't get it. It wasn't that I was academically unable to cut it there; rather, I was one of 500 students applying for a program that accepted 180. I was crushed.

I muddled through my first term in Pittsburgh; bored and trying to decide whether or not I should apply again to Princeton. I remember going up to Andrew Purves's office and asking him what his opinion of the matter was. Rather than telling me what to do, he laid out the strengths and weaknesses of both schools; encouraging me to pray and discern what Jesus was up to in my life. When I got home that afternoon, I had decided that I would give Pittsburgh a chance until the end of the school year. At first, nothing spectacular came from that decision, but a few weeks later, I began to see the value in Pittsburgh Seminary, the benefits and the opportunities that were available for me to participate within. When I stopped being so wrapped up in what I wanted, getting out of the way and focusing in on what Jesus was doing in my life, I suddenly began to see the world through a different lens; no longer resisting where Jesus was taking me but hitching a ride on his back and letting him change me from the inside-out. I mention this little tale because it is a fitting way of getting into this morning's passage from Ephesians.

As I mentioned earlier, our passage from Ephesians 3 operates as a hinge between the first three chapters and the last three chapters of Paul's letter. Up to this point, Paul has been carefully describing

---

<sup>1</sup> Sermon preached by the Rev. Thomas Moore on Sunday, August 9, 2009 at Emsworth UP Church.

the mission and ministry of God made known to the world in, through, and as Jesus Christ. Specifically, Paul has been referring to the purpose of God to reconcile all humanity and bring about the redemption of creation. Relentlessly, Paul has made reference to the brokenness that existed in the lives of Jews and Gentiles and Jesus' work of healing and reconciliation through his cross and resurrection to bring about new life with God. In response to the depths of this mystery of salvation, Paul takes a moment out of his discussion to offer up a prayer on behalf of his readers.

Informing the Ephesians that he gets down on his knees before the Father, Paul basically prays, "I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ himself may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I ask him that you might have both feet firmly planted, being rooted and grounded in love, so that you'll be able to take in with all God's holy ones the dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God."<sup>2</sup>

Within his prayer, Paul expresses the hope that believers would be strengthened by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit each and every moment of their lives. He's not so much saying that we are strengthened physically in terms of stamina or prowess; rather Paul is referring to a strengthening that occurs within the core of our beings. It's a glorious inner strength felt deep down in the gut that assures us of the promises of God and is bold enough to see the world in terms of the ways God is working. And because the presence and power of the Holy Spirit is with us, Paul asserts that Jesus himself dwells within us out of the freedom of his love. Now Paul isn't thinking of just some metaphorical sense of dwelling or some touchy-feely understanding of it. No, he firmly believes that we live our lives in Christ; that we are so joined in union with Jesus that he dwells within us and we dwell within him – in short, that we live and move and have our being in him. We might not feel it all the time, but it is the reality that we enter into because Jesus himself lays hold of us and makes it so. At the end of the day, Paul's prayer is an earnest desire for all Christians, and for us, to be completely and utterly overtaken by Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrase with additions taken from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, 408.

It's no small thing to suggest that Paul hopes believers will be filled with the Holy Spirit, strengthened from the inside out by the power of God, and know that the presence and power of Jesus Christ dwelling within them so that we might be rooted and grounded in Jesus' love. This isn't just a dream or a wish that Paul carries; rather his prayer intends that our lives would be continually molded and shaped by the strength and power of our Lord, transforming us from the inside out and filling us with his presence. Instead of holding back or being tentative in our walk with God, building our lives into a fortress against the world where nothing gets in, Paul prays that our lives might serve as a reflection of God's love and purpose for the world; that we would fling wide the doors of our lives and our faith so that the power of Christ dwelling within us might really and truly change us from the inside out. And that raises some problems for us.

One of the biggest challenges we face in our pilgrimage with God is how much space we're willing to give Jesus in our lives; how far we're willing to go in our walk with him before we put up our walls of resistance, refusing to take another step further. I often hear many people complain that so much of the Christian life is just plain hard, but I think the issue is deeper than that. Deep down there is resistance to change, there is resistance to giving up control in our lives; we resist the power of the Holy Spirit working within us, we resist the presence of Christ dwelling within us as we dwell within him because we know that when we give up control, when we let go and let Christ take over, change and transformation is inevitable - and that scares the living daylights out of us.

As one commentator suggests, "Having Christ dwell in our hearts is akin to having a new person move into your household. If they're just visiting, it is all rather easy; you simply offer hospitality and try to practice good manners. But if someone moves in to stay, everything changes. At first you might try to hold on to your familiar patterns and routines, and the new member may work hard to accommodate you and stay out of the way. But eventually they make their mark. Conversations change. Relationships realign. Household tasks increase and responsibilities shift. So it is when Christ moves into the hearts of

Christians. This isn't merely tweaking old patterns; everything changes."<sup>3</sup> And that's the part that really gets to us. Even if we're unhappy with where we're at, we're not always sure we want Jesus jumping into the mix. Too often in the Christian life, it's all fine and dandy to be joined in union with Jesus as long as he doesn't go around messing with the furniture. Except that's not the way life works and we know that.

Being rooted and grounded in Christ's love is a molding experience; a transformative experience that happens in the midst of our day-to-day lives. No one ever said that our walk with God would be seamless and simple. Make no mistake, transformation from the inside out is hard work. It's like a long-distance runner beginning his/her training for the first time or doing a new exercise or even a new job that you've never done before. In terms of a physical endeavor, the pain is massive at first; the body aches in places and joints that you never knew existed. New jobs bring new headaches and feelings of inadequacy. As Jesus works to change us from the inside out there's resistance, there are aches and pains and inadequacies of a spiritual nature that don't always feel good at first. Yet, the more that Jesus works to transform us from the inside out, the more we are able to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of God's work, love, and power in the world; we grow more and more into knowing the love of Christ that surpasses all that we think we know about the world.

Whether we want to admit it or not, we're all in need of the transformation Jesus brings; we're all in need of continually being molded for kingdom life. One area might be some opinion or stereotype you hold that is ultimately destructive and Jesus wants to transform it. Another might be a habit or a way of doing things that is not God-bearing and is in need of change. Through and through, whatever Jesus seeks to change within us, to transform us more and more into his image and likeness, it will be for the glory of God and fulfillment of his mission and ministry to the world.

Where are the areas in your life that you resist Jesus from changing you the most? Pray about them! How is he working out of the freedom of his love and in the power of the Spirit to mold you and

---

<sup>3</sup> Karen Chakoian, "Ephesians 3:14-21" *Feasting on the Word, Year B, vol. 3* (Westminster/John Knox: Louisville, 2009), 280.

shape you into the person he is calling you to be? Lift that concern to the Lord! How is Jesus' transformative power alive in your life as you grow in discipleship? Throw wide the doors of your life and let the Lord do his work as he dwells within you. While transformation isn't an instantaneous event but a lifelong pilgrimage, I promise you that the more you get out of the way and let Jesus do his work, the more you'll see the world around you differently as he transforms your life from the inside out. He's at work even now and I'm willing to bet that you'll discover that the one whose power is at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we could ever ask or imagine for our lives. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.