

First Presbyterian Church
“The Story of God: Spirit and Church,” Eph. 3:14-21
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 2/27/2022

If you ever wonder what in the world God is doing or...
what God is doing in the world,

think back to these fence posts in the biblical story:

What God is doing now is directly connected to what he did then.

- Creation: God created the world and put humans in a place made for pure relationship with God.
- Fall: humanity sought independence from God;
- Covenant: God then called Abram and Sarai and made promises to them of a new place – a promised land and blessing to all people on earth.
- Exodus: God saved their descendants from slavery in Egypt and brought them into the promised land;
- Kingship: God gave them a righteous King named David and he established David’s throne forever;
- Exile: but when Israel forgot about God they were sent into exile, their country was taken over by foreigners;
- Messiah: then in the fullness of time God sent a Messiah to redeem the people from Exile but not only that—to announce freedom to all captives, to bring blessing to all peoples on the earth, to bring about a new creation in the people of God, to fulfill the Law and the prophets, to fulfill the promises God made to Abraham.

That is what the vast majority of the Bible is about.

The deep theme of this story is that God wants our hearts.

The way that God is present in our hearts is through the Holy Spirit.

The vehicle for uniting our hearts together in the world is the church.

And so the final chapter in this story is the Spirit and the Church.

This passage comes from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians,
and it’s actually a prayer.

This prayer of Paul’s is all about getting us
out of our ruts and our religious habits,
and finding once again the core of what it means
to know and love our Creator.

It's a prayer that gives us a glimpse of what God intends for us.

Paul begins in verse 14 and he says, "You want to know why I pray?
Do you want to know why I kneel before the Father—
who's not just the Father of the Jews,
but the Father that every family in heaven
and on earth gets its name from?
It's for this reason..."

That introduction once again underlines this theme we've been
working with for the past two weeks—
God is the creative and relational foundation for all peoples.

But for a God who's story is so universal and cosmic,
we also see in this prayer of Paul's that God cares for us
on a very personal and individual level.

The basic prayer Paul prays is
that God the Father may strengthen the Ephesian believers
through the Holy Spirit in their inner being.

Why does Paul pray this?
So that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.

He prays that God's Spirit would strengthen the Ephesian believers
so Christ may dwell in their hearts.

What's the point being made here?
Christ is not going to be allowed to dwell in our hearts
unless the Spirit overcomes our resistance to his occupation.

Does that ring true in your story? I know that my life has been
one lesson after another that I have to let go of my resistance to
giving God every piece of me.

Apart from God's help, we don't want to give our hearts to God.
We don't naturally want to tell our story in light of God's story.
We're all spiritual teenagers, and *we just want to be left alone.*

So Paul prays that God's Spirit would break down our resistance,
empowering and strengthening us from the inside out,
so that we can finally make room for
Christ to abide within us.

Thinking about this, I'm reminded that Jesus told the disciples,
"Abide in me and I will abide in you."

The result is that we are *rooted* in love.

Here I think Paul may have in mind the person in Psalm One
who is like a tree planted by streams of water.
With Christ in our hearts our roots grow like a tree's,
deeper and deeper into the love of God.

The verse also says we are *established* in love.

Here I think Paul is envisioning a building
with a firm foundation that can be built higher and higher.

To take this a bit further, I would say that the church is
rooted and established as the tree or tower of God's love in a *place*.
Remember the connection of place and relationship
throughout this review of the Bible?

Garden of Eden – a place and a relationship.

When sin broke the relationship, they were kicked out from the place.

Covenant – a relationship with a promise of place.

When God saved Israel from Egypt,
they received the blessing of the promised land.

Exile – again, a broken relationship with God led to
being removed from the place of that relationship.

Then comes Messiah:

The promise of God to Israel is shared to those who
come in faith to Israel's Messiah.

But what happens to place when the Messiah
expands the promise?

Two things:

A) The place of relationship is moved to the hearts of the people.

B) The people create a place where God's Kingdom is exhibited
to the world wherever they live.

For the Ephesians, the place was Ephesus.

For the Galatians the place was Galatia.

For the church in Jerusalem, the place was the original location
of God's covenant relationship in the Promised Land.

For us, the primary place we exhibit our relationship with God
is the Willamette Valley.

The injustice and terror of the Russian war on Ukraine reveals
the immense importance of place and how we live in it.

The way we understand the place we live impacts
how we treat our neighbors.

The arrival of God's Spirit in our hearts results in transformation
that extends to the larger place where we relate to God.

So, just as the community of faith now extends around the world,
the place which is the context for the church's relationship with God
also includes the whole world and everything God has made.

In verse 18, Paul continues his prayer with another petition.

Paul prays, **“That you may have power,
together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long
and high and deep is the love of Christ,
and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.”**

Why is it so hard to understand God's love?

Why does it slip through our fingers like sand?

Sometimes I overthink God's love so that I can get it figured out.

But Paul tells us that the reason that doesn't work
is that Christ's love goes beyond knowledge.

It's something you have to experience in the present moment.

It's something you have to notice in the day to day
mundane moments of your life.

Here's the encouraging thing:

It's God's plan that the Spirit
will give us power to understand how great Christ's love is.
And it is wide and long and high and deep.

How is it possible for us to truly understand something so far beyond us?

Professor Darrell Johnson says that as the Spirit
empowers us to be rooted like a tree in love,
as the Spirit establishes us like a building
with a right foundation in love,
our roots go deeper, building goes higher, and as a result over time
we can grasp a little bit more of how
wide and long and high and deep Jesus' love is.

Without that understanding, our religion becomes empty,
our actions become forced.

We wash the outside of the cup even
though the inside is filthy.

But when we can grasp a bit of Jesus' love,
we can go through extraordinary things.
That's why God wants our hearts.

So the first thing Paul prays is that the Spirit
would strengthen the church so Christ can dwell within them.
The second thing Paul prays is that
the church would have the power to grasp
the abundance of Christ's love.

The third thing Paul prays for is the shortest, but it's also the boldest.
“That you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

A full measure is language from the kitchen.
This is the idea that you are a measuring cup,
and that measuring cup will be filled to the fullest
with everything it is that makes God be God.

Can you imagine praying anything more bold than that?
If Paul didn't pray this in Scripture, would ever consider praying
something that presumptuous?

Whatever your story is, wherever you have come from in life,
whatever the story of your neighbor or family member,
God actually created us to be full of the Spirit so that
Jesus could live with us. Not just in part, but in full measure.

So right now I ask you to still yourself.

Get comfortable and take a few deep breaths.

I'm going to pray these words we've been talking about.

We're going to invite this passage to go from our heads,
into our hearts.

“Father, I pray that out of your glorious riches

you would strengthen each person who is here

with power through your Spirit in their inner being,

so that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith.

And I pray that they, being rooted and established in love, may have power,
together with all the Lord's people,

to grasp how wide and long and high and deep

is the love of Christ,

and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—

that they may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

God doesn't want our religious language.

God doesn't want our formalities. God wants our hearts.

It's because of the Spirit of Christ alive in your heart

that God can do more than you could ever imagine,

and he will receive glory in the church—

that is in your life and my life—

because the true church is filled by Christ.

Living in that reality gives us a new way to tell our life stories.

It gives us a new way to tell the story

of our school and work life.

It gives us a new way to tell the story

of the tragedies we see in the world around us.

It gives us a reason for believing that God could actually use us

to bless those around us, does it not?