

10th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Ephesians 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 his 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 glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Because I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by birth by loving parents, loving family, loving friends, and a loving church family, love was one of the first concepts I remember learning as a young lad. Some of my earliest memories are visiting my grandparents home over in Huntington, WV, eating my grandmother's homemade pumpkin pie, learning to swim in my grandparents' country club pool, and being showered by love by them when my family would visit them several times a year. I thought I knew what love was. But then, when I was seven years old, I held my baby sister, Sarah Kate, when she was born. And then I went, "oh, this is what love is."

I thought I knew what love was, but then I had my first girlfriend in seventh grade. We exchanged an ungodly amount of handwritten love notes - there were no text messages or emojis in those days - and we walked hand-in-hand between classes and awkwardly swayed back and forth at the school dances.

I thought I knew what love was, and then I fell in love with music. I started playing piano, and trumpet, and guitar, and singing in the church choir, and I discovered a passion within me of expressing myself and learning more about the love of God through song and worship. I learned that one of the best ways to experience love with group of people was by singing together.

I thought I knew what love was, but then I went off to college and fell in love with theology and met my best friends who have been with me through thick and thin.

I thought I knew what love was, but then I married Tricia and I went, "oh, *this* is what love is."

I thought I knew what love was, but then Tricia and I welcomed a little Goldendoodle puppy into our home who is now a not-so-little ball of fluff and snuggles.

I thought I knew what love was, but then I had to say goodbye, less than two months ago, to my first congregation.

We all think we know what love is, but then the child is born, or the parent dies, or the cousin is adopted, or the new passion is found. Life is a never-ending cycle of saying hello and goodbye, celebrating

joys and lamenting sorrows. Through these waves of life we are continually learning new ways of love, different depths, nooks, and crannies that we might not have known existed.

In today's passage, Paul writes a love letter of sorts to the congregation in Ephesus. The affection the writer has for his audiences practically oozes from the words he pens: "I pray that 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."

Friends, if there is one prayer I have for this congregation as we journey through the first few months of our time together, it is that God may make us rooted and grounded in love. When we are rooted and grounded in God's love, then we are not easily swayed when the storms of life come a-blowin'. When we are rooted and grounded in God's love, then we set a faithful example for our children and our families. When we are rooted and grounded in God's love, we see each new challenge as an opportunity to express the riches of God's grace.

I believe that in order to be properly rooted and grounded in God's love, we must be inspired to look for it everywhere and be prepared to be amazed at its magnitude. I do my best to stand in awe of God's love wherever I find it because my parents raised me in a church family that *taught* me to look for it! I am an imperfect but passionate practitioner of God's love because I was raised in a family that lifted up God's love and said "here is a gift we are called to share. That is why we're here. That is our purpose."

But when we become part of a family that is rooted and grounded in God's love, it does not mean that everything is going to be smooth sailing. It doesn't mean that there will not be conflict, or heartbreak, or struggle. But what it does mean is that that conflict, that heartbreak, or that struggle will be experienced through the lens of God's abundance providence and fullness within the context of the Christian community.

After Paul tells us his wish that we be rooted and grounded in love, he prays that we have the power to comprehend it.

We read again: "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."

For you visual learners out there, it occurs to me that the verbiage of today's passage paints a portrait of how God's love manifests itself. The breadth, length, height, and depth of God's love (four points) makes a cross. A visual reminder that the empty cross is the best reminder we have of God's love. Friends this love surpasses knowledge. This love cannot truly be measured. But there are some things we can identify about this love.

This love that Paul speaks of in today's passage, this love that manifests itself on that cross and, three days later, out of that empty tomb, is no cheesy, skin-deep, disposable love. This is an "I've got your *back*" love. This is a "life or death" love. This is a love that boldly and subversively stands in the face of evil in this world and says "NO." This is a love that isn't afraid to stand up for what is right even when it is the most unpopular thing to do. This is a love that evil fears so much that it cowers in the corner when it shows up.

Christ embodies this love for us and Paul's prayer, and my prayer as well, is that we would challenge ourselves to measure the immeasurable. I pray that we might never stand back and act as if we fully know the extent of God's love.

Friends, this love is a power. A power, Paul says in today's passage, that is at work *in us*. In you and me. And it will accomplish abundantly far more than we could ever ask or imagine. This truly renewable resource is at our disposal if only we have the courage to wield it. And, friends, know this: when you wield this love in God's name, when you lose yourself in its breadth and length and height and depth, people will notice.

Like so many other churches, we want to grow. And, for the past decade, we've tried many things: hiring the young pastor to bring in the young families, renovating the building, making our worship more "contemporary," and so on and so forth. But they, in and of themselves, do NOT work. Now don't get me wrong, I don't think that they are necessarily bad things. But these steps do not address the underlying issue that I believe to be this: what people crave the most, these days, is authenticity and radical hospitality. And both things depend on whether or not a community has truly released itself into the fullness of God's love.

So, friends, I hope and pray that we might be filled with the fullness of God's love. I hope that this fullness will allow us to cast aside the things that distract us from our true mission, to love and serve the Lord by loving and serving others. I pray that we might grow together, rooted and grounded in love, and embrace the fullness that God is calling us to share with others.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.