

Rooted, Grounded and Surrounded by Love

Ephesians 3:14-21

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Recent days have brought us to our knees. Let's be honest, recent months have brought us to our knees and just when we thought the end of this scourge was near, we've been hit hard again. We've been knocked back by this virus, to be sure, but we've been battered even harder by death, sudden and premature. Many among us carry extra burdens of chronic illness, financial strain or family upheaval.

For all of this and more I bow my knees before the Father, for all of us, for each of you, for our congregation, community, country and world. I am feeling keenly that admonition from Paul in *I Thessalonians* to pray without ceasing, taking solace that his instruction is for the Church universal, not me or you or any of us individually. Comforted by the knowledge that someone, somewhere is always praying and that many, many Presbyterians from North Dakota to South Carolina are lifting our community of faith up to the throne of God's grace.

This soaring language from Ephesians is a plea from one believer to God on behalf of other Christians for whom he cares deeply. And his plea is that the Ephesians, that fragile group of followers, will know the truth that they are rooted, grounded and surrounded by Christ's love. The writer of this prayer knows that this is true, they are already, surely, enveloped by the love of God. There is no doubt that the grace and mercy of their Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer is holding them up, leading them forward, chasing them down, hemming them in behind and before and the one brought to her knees desperately wants the Ephesians to know this truth, be encouraged by it, and live boldly because of it.

Almost daily, I walk down the hall behind this majestic sanctuary. I punch in the code and pull that heavy door toward me and step into the space that somehow smells like every church I've ever entered. But unlike any church I've ever been in before, this one has those walls with pictures of deceased elders from the 1800's to the present, a literal communion of the saints surrounding me as I head to my office. At first, I am not going to lie, it felt a little weird. Maybe I've watched the Harry Potter movies too much, but I half expected to see them move or hear them speak. But as the months have gone on, I've come to welcome their presence as I cross the threshold into this sacred space. And lately, I've been the one talking to them.

I stop and take stalk of their clothing, glasses and hairstyles, all of which indicate the era in which they led this congregation. I think of the dates when they walked this earth and recall what was happening when they were called to serve with energy, intelligence, imagination and love.

There are the ones who weathered the Civil War, World War I and World War II and the Korean War and Vietnam. The Spanish Flu. The Great Depression. The Civil Rights Movement. They were there for the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy. The long-delayed reunion of our denomination. The ordination of women. The debates about who could be ordained and named in Christ's church. There was the Cold War. The Cuban Missal Crisis. 911. And so much more.

I can't help but stand back and take in the whole of them and wonder: who among you did your peers and the pastor think were real pains in the...neck, those ornery, contrary, difficult ones who were elected nonetheless because despite their crustiness they were unquestionably faithful, devoted and wise, voices that were needed even when they were not always wanted. Which ones stood up and said hard but necessary things? Who spoke the truth in love or made sure the building repairs were done or took careful account of every penny or made children feel special or welcomed the stranger? What kept them up at night and what brought them peace?

I think about all they endured, not just historically, but personally. I know some buried children and others watched their partner suffer with a painful illness. I am sure some carried unknown regrets and all of them had losses that were hard to understand in the face of God's promised plan that everything works for good for those who love God.

I look at the faces, I think about the dates and decades and I know they made mistakes in those years represented by the little dash in between their births and their deaths. They didn't get everything right. They, like us, sometimes had a failure of nerve in the face of needed change. They, like us, at times knew what was right but did the very thing they hated anyway. They got angry and let their temper, get the better of them. They hurt the ones closest to them. They were not always on the right side of history or standing with their Savior and yet because God is good, all the time and all the time God is good, in their courageous faith and in their greatest failures, in their triumphs and their desperation, they were always, always, rooted, grounded and surrounded by the love of their Lord. And we are, too.

That's the plea of this prayer, not to conjure up the inexplicable love of God or beg for that amazing grace, but to know it, trust it, embrace it, lean it to it, and mostly to lavishly, unashamedly, and without embarrassment share it. That's the hope of these verses, to trust the love of God so much we'll take great risks for the sake of it, knowing the Spirit is at work even

when we don't do everything right. Remembering that Christ prays for us when we are at a loss for words.

We've been brought to our knees but even here, if we are brave enough to open our eyes, we will look down and see that the love of the Most High God is beneath us, holding us up. If we are bold enough to look up just a little, we will see that the Son above us praying with and for us. If we have just enough hope to look around we will see the whole communion of the saints, the ones on those walls, the ones worshipping in sacred spaces, the ones we miss the most, surrounding us, cheering us on, all of them pleading, praying that we will know that we are rooted, grounded and surrounded by the love of God and nothing, nothing, nothing can separate us from it.

These recent days, weeks, months, have brought us to our knees, but perhaps from this posture we know without question how badly we need not just the love of God but the care of one another. I can tell you that you have embodied Jesus' commandment to his disciples and shown you are Christians through your love. We see it. We feel it we can attest to it. I joked at the stewardship committee meeting Wednesday evening that the only idea for this year's theme I had was, "We're still here." But friends, we are still here. When I walk that hallowed hall and see those faithful faces the word of the Lord that comes to me is in fact: We are still here. Thanks to God and the people God called to serve in this place: We are still here. We are still singing and celebrating the Lord's Supper. We are still feeding the hungry and tending to the hurting. We are still seeking to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God. We will inevitably stumble and get it wrong and sometimes do the very thing we hate but even then, because God is good, all the time, all through the ages and even in those seasons when we are brought to our knees, we are rooted, grounded and surrounded by God's love and nothing, nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ Jesus our Lord.

We can trust that sacrificial, all poured out, nothing held back, transformative, saving love, lean into it, stand upon it, fall back or collapse on it, lurch or stumble forward from it, stop and rest within it and know we are surrounded by the communion of the saints, and the power of God evident in the breadth, length, height and depth of all creation, because we are still here. The saints through the ages are right now reminding us that God did not abandon them and will never leave us alone either. I picture them cheering us on no less than the families and friends of the Olympiads watching from afar but ready to embrace us when we're together again. Singing, shouting and praising God, proclaiming the remarkable truth that no matter what: we are loved, we are loved, we are loved. Do not forget: You are loved, you are loved, you are loved. Even now, especially now, now we are rooted, grounded and surrounded by the saving, transformative, unstoppable, all-powerful love of God, who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, so, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.