

Rooted And Grounded In Love

Ephesians 3:14-21

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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,
God 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, forever and ever. Amen.

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I.

Where does one begin? That's always the question in life, isn't it? As the saying goes, watch out for the first step, its a *doozy*. This is certainly the case when it comes sermon writing. I can't tell you the *number* of times, or the *amount* of time, I've spent staring at a blank page wondering how to begin a sermon. However, once started, once I find a direction and I get those first few sentences written, the rest of the sermon seems to just flow. The sermon doesn't necessarily write *itself*, a great deal of effort is always involved, and rarely is it a straight line from inception to completion. I can tell you this, though, if you don't start off correctly the task becomes a much messier affair and certainly a lot less fun.

II.

Speaking of fun, this past Friday was a most wonderful day in the park. The weather was perfect: sunny and dry, with the temperatures ranging from warm to not quite too hot. The entire park was bustling. At this point in the growing season most of the farmers have a wide array of fruits and vegetable for sale. Tomatoes are starting to come in, corn is just around the corner, blueberries are bountiful. There are a couple of stands selling fresh cut flowers, where are really delightful and afford a real opportunity for whimsy. We seem to have a number of excellent bakers this year all making a concerted effort to tempt even the most disciplined. The Yoga folks were doing their yoga thing, there was live music (Celtic), the fountain was fixed and flowing from all three bowls and there was a general sense, being shared by everyone, that all is right with the world.

III.

And, across the street on the lawn of the First Presbyterian Church, Barb Brown, Pat Mace and Ellen Grayson were having themselves a hoot of a time giving away free clothing with donations gladly accepted. I admit I raised my eyebrow a bit when the plan was first hatched to implement such a business model so as to make a dent in our rummage sale stock by setting up on Friday

Market days. After having suspended our usual rhythm of fall and spring rummage sales due to COVID, we had amassed quite a hoard of merchandise, as lots of people cleaned house during the pandemic. Having been isolated in our own homes for all of those months, many folks could no longer ignore the accumulation of unwanted or no longer used belongings and were well afforded the opportunity to do something about it. All to the benefit of our rummage sale inventory.

IV.

Admittedly, though, we had reached a point of ridiculous, and clearly there was more stashed away down in the basement than we would ever be able to put out and sell when we eventually return to normal practices. Moreover, however, these mounds of clothes and household items offended the innate sense of order at work, especially, in Pat and Ellen; and too a lesser degree, Barb. So, in a bit of a brilliant brainstorm, these mavens of mess took it upon themselves to begin the practice of hauling stuff out of the basement, setting it up on the lawn, and giving it away for free; with donations gratefully accepted for the work and mission of the church. Which for many people, came as something of an amusing but, nevertheless, head-scratching notion.

V.

I, myself, have been around for several of these Friday events to observe, first-hand, the rather amusing process of people stumbling upon this little enterprise at some point in their Farmers Market shopping experience. You can see folks standing on the sidewalk in the park, glancing over to the church lawn watching Pat, Ellen, Barb and, sometimes, Martha Cole, busily setting out clothes, folded on tables or hanging from the tree, and lining up an array of other goods here and there. And, then, they see the sign that says, "Free" and that really gives people pause. Free!?! *Nothing* in life is free. What's the *catch*? So, with their curiosity having gotten the better of them, they mosey over across the street to check out what the heck is going on at the Presbyterian Church.

VI.

Almost always, the first question is the same, “Is it *really* free?” So, the ladies explain, and encourage and entice and, at times, even cajole the would-be shopper to peruse the goods. It really is remarkable to observe the paradigm shift which takes place in people, when they realize they can have any of the stuff for free...*really*. No catch, no hidden agenda, no other shoe to eventually drop. I mean, it is just such a foreign concept in our society, to offer something of value in exchange for nothing. The notion is particularly acute given the juxtaposition of the Farmers Market just across the street where, as you would normally expect, one gets only that for which one can pay. If my observations are correct, and I believe that they are, to most folks this whole enterprise comes as something of a shock but, also, as a very pleasant surprise.

VII.

Now, I’m aware that the women from our church who have taken up this task do so to unburden us from so much clutter and to get these clothes and household wares into the hands of people who truly need them. As an added side-benefit, though, they have no small amount of fun while doing so. Because make no mistake about it, they *do* have fun; and great fun at that.

It’s fun to be doing something pleasant and productive with each other, and fun to interact with all manner of folks; intersecting with them in their lives if only for a few minutes. I’m sure they can tell you, that all manner of conversations take place with many interesting stories being told. Moreover, though, and one can readily witness this even from afar, people *relax*. Postures loosen, words soften, people linger, smiles broaden and hearts warm.

VIII.

However, being an everyday theologian, I’m also aware that this whole enterprise is a remarkable and poignant symbol and manifestation of the biblical understanding of grace, and the appropriate response to that grace. It is sheer evangelical genius, really. A proclamation of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, in the form of t-shirts, dresses and the interaction with folks on most pleasant summer’s day. There is no pressure, no hard sell, no hidden agenda, no commitment required, with the only cost involved being the time and effort one freely chooses to afford oneself to simply check out what is

going on, and to discover what is actually happening right there in front of them: to cross the street from the commerce in the park to the grace being doled out, with liberality, over at the church.

IX.

All of that, and a business model which actually turns a tidy profit as many people do, in fact, decide to make a donation for the goods received and effort required to provide them. Rather than an exchange of money for product or an onus of obligation, however, this is a response of good works to the grace that is being offered; both of which are being freely and joyfully given. Standing there Friday watching folks cross the street to the church and engage with Pat, Ellen and Barb to discover what is happening at the church, both in that moment and, perhaps, at a deeper level, I was reminded of the Apostle Paul's prayer from today's scripture reading from Ephesians chapter 3: that we may have the power to comprehend, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to come to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God.

X.

There it is then, that important first step at the heart of what goes on during those Friday give-aways and, more importantly, what must go on in a church every day of the year: the love of Christ. In today's passage, Paul speaks about being rooted and grounded in love. This, then, is the doozy of a first step we, as a church, must take whenever we embark on any mission, effort or endeavor. However, if we claim this as our starting point, as the first step, *everything* else will flow from there.

For those of us who have been in the church for any length of time, we are well aware that a church doesn't just *happen*; a great deal of effort is always involved, and rarely is it a straight line that we follow into our future. As our forebears in faith also experienced, more often than not we are going to wander through the wilderness before reaching the promised land. But, oh, all the things we learn and experience along the way from making such a journey.

XI.

Every journey, though, must begin with that first step. For the followers of Christ, the place we must always and ever begin is being rooted and grounded in love. And not just any love, the love of Christ. Such a love gives itself away, for free. This is grace that has no strings attached, no hidden agenda, no other shoe to drop, and comes at no cost to us. True, we may eventually choose to respond to such love and grace, by making a donation in response to what has been received, but regardless of the response, the gift is always the the same, and it is always free...*really*. All we every need do to receive it is to simply let our own curiosity get the better of us so as to decide to cross the street from the way the rest of the world conducts itself and its business, to the way the church operates: as a community of faith, rooted and grounded in love, and looking to have no small amount of fun along the way. Amen.