

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 103
SECOND LESSON: Ephesians 3:14-21
July 25, 2021

“How Deep and How Wide!”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

I suspect that we all think that the early Christians were super beings whose faith never wavered, who never had a bad day and who lived on a spiritual mountaintop. And we're tempted to think this because the language the apostle Paul uses about faith is often so extravagant. Paul goes on about glory and experiencing God's love and grace. But daily life is not like that. And if it's not like that for us, I think it's safe to say that that daily life for the early Christians wasn't like that either. Admittedly they didn't have the type of distractions we have. Not one of them was obsessively glued to a smart phone. They never checked email eight times a day or caught up on the news 24 hours a day. They didn't have people texting them and being annoyed if they didn't hear back right away. Life was QUIETER. But it was not necessarily EASIER. 1st century people had all the same type of relationship issues we have. They had work to do, in-laws, children, parents, health issues and daily struggles.

But when I read scripture, particularly the letters of the New Testament, I sometimes end up feeling like a spiritual failure. Reading prayers like the one we read today can give the impression that life should be one long ecstatic moment. Paul prays that out of God's glorious riches God will strengthen the Ephesians with power through God's Spirit in their inner being. The type of power he is speaking of is *dunamis*, from which we get the word dynamite. This is not just a little bit of extra energy. This is serious power, the result of which is that Christ will dwell in their hearts through faith. Paul prays for Christ to move in and make a home in the hearts of the Ephesians, and by extension us. The heart in 1st century understanding is the very center our beings, spiritual and physical. It's our will, our emotions, our personality and life force. The heart is where character lives. And it is here that Paul says God chooses to dwell. We are not alone. God is as close to us as a breath.

As amazing as this is, Paul then adds a second prayer, that we be rooted and established in love. As a gardener I know the importance of being rooted and established. I've seen a lot of unfortunate flowers carelessly transplanted—not put in deep enough and planted in bad soil. We are to be firmly rooted and established in LOVE, with the result that we, together with all God's people, will have power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. Paul is reaching for superlatives here. God's love is wide and inclusive, not narrow and exclusive. God's love encompasses all of creation. God's love is long. It doesn't end. It goes on and on. God's love is high, extending into the heavens. God's love reaches the stars and beyond. And God's love is deep. It is

profound and full, the deepest of all mysteries. And finally, Paul prays that we would “know this love that surpasses knowledge—that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

This is an amazing prayer, an extravagant prayer, and a sometimes misunderstood prayer, because much as it might sound like Paul wants us to exist on a permanent spiritual high, he probably doesn't. We're not designed for that much intensity.

In my daily life I do not **feel** “filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” I have had experiences in my life, brief experiences, when I have felt God's love in a powerful way. But much as I would like to feel this every day, I don't. It would be like expecting a couple who have been married for 60 years to have the same emotional intensity they did when they first fell in love and didn't want to let each other out of their sight. After sixty years the love is still there. In fact, it's much deeper and more real. But it's not the same as the early days of passion. We know this on a human level, but sometimes we have a hard time applying it to our spiritual lives.

Mother Teresa had a powerful experience of God in her mid 30s. She felt called to minister to the poorest of the poor and she obeyed that call. And for a few years she continued to feel that closeness with God, until one day, it stopped. She never knew why. Sometimes it made her despair. Mother Teresa lived the rest of her years and ministry right up to her death unable to feel God's presence at all. But feelings aren't facts. She faithfully followed her call.

Being able to feel something is not a fair measurement of spiritual growth. To my way of thinking, the fact that Mother Teresa continued to obey God when she felt nothing speaks louder than any amount of emotion. THAT is faithfulness. Yet in much of the Christian world it is emotional experiences that count. Presbyterians might not encounter a lot of this, but in independent charismatic churches the passionate people speaking about their mountain top experiences with God are held in much higher regard than the ordinary member cleaning up the coffee cups after church. Being able to *feel* God is equated with being *close* to God. But there are a lot of reasons we might not feel God's presence with us. Conveniently enough for me today I realized that they spell out the word STRESS.

At the top of the list is **shame**. *Yeah right, we say, you say God loves me, but I know the truth. The family I came from is no good, or I grew up in poverty so I'll never measure up, or I've done things I'm ashamed of and God will never forgive me, or God could not possibly love me. I am deeply flawed.* But Jesus came to deliver us from shame—both deserved and undeserved. Shame is toxic.

The second obstacle is **transference**. Since God is the ultimate authority, we transfer on to God the attributes of other authorities in our lives. Those with abusive fathers find this especially challenging. If our authority figures have been harsh, we create a god who is harsh.

Resentment can also block our awareness of God's presence. Things are difficult and everyone else looks like they have it easy. *It's not fair! God is being unjust.* This is further fueled if we believe that if God loves me my life should be going great and I should prosper.

Simple **exhaustion** can make us lose sight of God. We have physical bodies. When we're exhausted all of the things that make us aware of others, including God, are dimmed.

Suffering can impact our spiritual awareness. In times of acute trauma many of us have felt God especially close, but when trauma and pain become chronic, we become numb. The physical and emotional pain just takes over.

And finally, **sin** will block us from God. If I am persisting in doing something that I know is wrong, I will have to cut my conscience out of the picture, and in so doing, cut out God.

If we think that we should be wildly excited about God all the time, we will be disappointed. If we believe that we should be able to feel God's presence with us every day guiding our every act, we'll be very depressed when that doesn't happen. But God's love is just as real when we don't feel it as it is when we do.

Finally, there is another aspect of this text that we have not yet touched upon, and that is the fact that Paul was addressing a group, not individuals. Almost the entire prayer is written in the plural—to a group. The only singular use is the reference to the inner being of each person. All of these blessings and all of this power is experienced in the collective group. Once again, we have to set aside our "Lone Ranger" form of spirituality. We are more likely to experience God when we are together.

The pandemic necessitated our learning how to worship differently. Zoom became our standby. Strange at first, we rapidly became comfortable with it. We became so comfortable it was hard to come back in person! And there are some in our family of faith for whom livestream has been a godsend. Geographical distance, the responsibility of caregiving, disability and other challenges that would have kept people away no longer do. But for most of us, we need to come back together now. An empty building is not our future. The blessings that we seek are found in community, not solitude. We are strengthened and encouraged by the presence of others. Worshipping together lifts us into God's presence. Sharing our concerns and our faith heals us. And it is in the body of Christ that we experience God's love thru each other. It is as the body of Christ that we are empowered to reach out and love others. God is able to grow us in love, and "do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to God's power that is at work within us." Amen.

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 103

¹³ As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;

- 14** for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
- 15** The life of mortals is like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field;
- 16** the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.
- 17** But from everlasting to everlasting
the Lord's love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's children—
- 18** with those who keep his covenant
and remember to obey his precepts.

SECOND LESSON: Ephesians 3:14-21

14 For this reason I kneel before the Father, **15** from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. **16** I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, **17** so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, **18** may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, **19** and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, **21** to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.