

7-25-21
Pentecost 9
Ephesians 3:14-21

Rooted and Grounded

I've never been invited to serve on the committee that selects the texts that make up the lectionary that a lot of us use to plan worship and preaching every year. That's never been a particular career goal of mine, and it appears that's a good thing since at this stage of life I don't look for an invitation letter in the mail. It's probably a good thing I'm not on that group. Once in a while I want to ask them what they were thinking when they chose a particular text or, like today, when they decide to start a text where they do. And you know I'd have to ask those questions if I ever got around that table.

We read from Ephesians last week. But that reading stopped somewhere in chapter two. And today's reading starts in the middle of chapter three. And it begins, "For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father." That posture, it seems, assumes an attitude of worship, maybe even thanksgiving. So the text almost begs us to ask, "For what reason?" What is it that prompts this writer to give worship and praise to God and to encourage us to do the same?

A quick read through the verses between where we left off last week and where we begin today don't give us a quick or easy answer. So we read back through what Paul has been talking about, and we discover that what he's so excited is what he calls the Great Mystery, the Mystery that God has finally revealed through the ministry of Jesus and the preaching of his followers like Paul.

So let's talk about mysteries for a bit. What are some of the great mysteries of life? I can think of a few. Did the Lost City of Atlantis once fill part of what we know as the Atlantic Ocean?

What was Stonehenge all about? Was there some spiritual or religious meaning to those stones? People still want to know these things. What was on those missing eighteen minutes of the Watergate tapes? Who did kill Jimmy Hoffa? And then there are the even greater mysteries. You know I'll never understand Tennessee fans or people who follow that basketball team in Durham. As great as those mysteries are, Paul had something even greater and, in his mind, more mysterious in mind. Trouble is, the Great Mystery he refers to doesn't sound like much of a mystery to most of us. What he is so thankful to have out in the open after all these years is the marvel that God's love is not just for some, but for all. The inclusion of the Gentiles is what Paul says was a mystery for generations. Now, in Jesus, that mystery has been made clear for all to see. And writing to Gentiles in Ephesus, he wants them to know what a joy it is to be numbered among God's people.

He wants them and us to be rooted and grounded in this identity. He wants them and us to understand that our relationship with God is the core of who we are. More important than our family connections. More important than our politics. More foundational than our academic achievements. More important than any other allegiance or relationship we know.

For generations, this relationship was available to the Chosen. A careful reading of Scripture will show that this was never God's intention. Yes, God chose the Hebrew people, but God chose them to show the world what he could do with people who were committed to him. The Hebrews may not have been our direct ancestors in faith, but we certainly understand their thinking. We all like being the Chosen Ones. But somewhere along the way we get fearful that there won't be enough of God's love to go around, so we decide that if God chose us, then God can choose others if he wants them. And God does want them. The trouble is that God wants us to be the signs to them of what God does with people. God chose us to show the world what faithful and productive living is.

For many years, the Chosen Ones kept things safe and understandable. When Jesus came, that had to change. It has never been God's intention that we keep God's love bottled up and safe. There are indications of that truth throughout Scripture. Many of us learned the story of Naaman the Syrian in Sunday School. Naaman came to the prophet seeking healing from leprosy. And the prophet told him to wash in the Jordan River and he would be healed. And he was healed, but what we didn't learn in Sunday School was that he was a Gentile, one that many would have turned away instead of leading him to healing waters. The healing and redeeming love of God was never meant to be just for any one group. The Widow of Zarephath was not just a Gentile, she was a woman and widow. She had nothing to commend her to God in most people's way of thinking. But God sent the Prophet to her in the midst of famine that would surely have meant death to her and her son, and God sent the Prophet to care for her. In spite of stories like these, those who knew God's love were hesitant to share it with those who were different. And so the division between Jew and Gentiles became a way of life. It's just the way things were.

For people like us who practice an inclusive kind of Christian faith, one that believes that Jesus came to bring the Good News of God's love to all people, not just to some, calling this the Great Mystery gives us pause. Like many things about our history we must come to terms with things that happened before we were involved in them. While we can't change what has been, we can insure that, going forward, we will be so rooted and grounded in this broad understanding of God's love that we will do everything in our power to guarantee that the Gospel is proclaimed to everyone and that everyone is welcome in God's house and in all phases of its ministry.

Rooted and grounded are important images. I know I take you back to grammar lessons more often than you want to go, and I know it's summer and nobody wants to think about verbs, but it's important for us to understand that in this text, these are passive verbs. If we are to be rooted and grounded in the

inclusive love of God, that rooting and grounding must be done to us. It is not something we do for ourselves. We must have God's help to be rooted and grounded in love. Our nature is of another sort, one that leads to the kind of division Jews and Gentiles experienced for too long. But God will change that nature and will allow us to plant deep roots in love that reaches out to all.

You know how important roots are. If the roots of a plant are strong, that plant can survive harsh winters and blistering summers and thrive. If the roots are not well-anchored and able to take up the nourishment they need, those plants will not survive.

My roots are in Kentucky. At this stage of life, it appears that I will never live there again, but it is where I come from. It is where I learned what I know about things that matter. It's home. Our younger son, Kyle, was born in Indiana. He was born with some pretty severe respiratory issues and had to stay in the NICU for a long time. That's a scary place to be. I kept telling the nurses when I'd go in and out that if they'd just let me slip him out and across the River to Kentucky for a half a day, he'd be able to breathe! They didn't let me. And they weren't much impressed with my plans. But we finally did get him out of the hospital in time for a family gathering in a park in Kentucky that fall, and I took him with me, and he's still breathing today. We lived in the North for the first year and half of his life. And I used to stand over his bed at night and tell him, "This is not the real world. This is not where you belong. And someday I'll take you where you do." And we did. If you ask him today, he'd probably tell you that he put down roots in Alabama. That probably has as much to do with who he married as anything. And I'm glad he has a home. But Blake and I know that Kentucky is where our roots are. And that those roots run deep, not just during basketball season, but always.

Where our roots are determines who we become and how we become those people. As followers of Jesus Christ, our roots are always in love. Always. The love of Jesus which brought us to God began the process of rooting us in that same love so that

we could grow into people who would share it with others. We spend our lives experiencing what Paul calls the breadth and length and height and depth of that love. When we discover that its promises are real and that they are for us, we learn that it really is the core of who we are. When we know that God loves us and that nothing will ever change that, we are able to grow into people who love God, whatever it asks or demands of us. When we've gone to the end of our own ability a few times and discovered that God's power really is stronger than ours, we begin to believe that God's way to live just may be the way we need to follow, that love just might be the answer to all that ails us.

The world, even the best parts of it, of course will try to tell us that can't be. But God's love eventually found a way to get past all our efforts to hem it in and opened the way for people who never thought they'd be included to find God's love for them, too.

That work is not finished. There are plenty of those folks still around and among us who don't or can't believe that they have a place among us here. That's hard for us to hear because most of us really have moved beyond such thinking. There is no one who can't find a place of welcome among us here, regardless of where they came from, where they're going, where they went to school, or didn't, how many times they've been married, whether they can sing or not, whether they understand Scripture or need help navigating all that, whether they can give a lot or a little, whether they can teach or need to be taught—there is no one who cannot find a place to put down roots among us here. But many still don't know that.

The love that God has rooted and grounded us in requires that we tell them. We tell them in lots of different ways. The most important ones are probably not the ones you think of first. It begins with welcome. Simply letting people know we're glad they're here. You have no idea how important this is for people to hear. How important it is for you to hear. Someone came to me in another congregation several years ago and made a comment that has stuck with me. You know how I'm usually the one to

make the announcements and get things started in worship each week. I was really unaware of something I was doing until this person called my attention to it. She said, "You probably don't even know that every week when you're finished with all that preliminary stuff, before you go back up there to get things rolling, you always say, "I'm glad you're here! Now let's worship God together." I really wasn't aware that I was doing it. I had great worship and preaching teachers in Seminary. But they didn't teach me to do that. It's just something I fell into doing. I hope because my roots are in the welcoming love of Jesus. But this person said something I hadn't thought about. She said, "I don't think I ever remember anyone telling me he was glad I was in Church before." If that's true, that's a shame. Sharing the love of Jesus begins with welcome. Then it moves to learning about each other, accepting the ways we're the same and the ways we're different, caring about each other even when we disagree, working together as God calls and equips us in spite of what might divide us everywhere else. From there, who knows where the love of God will call us?

If our roots run deep in the love of God, we can't help but produce fruit that looks like that love, fruit the world needs and fruit God wants it to know.

If God's love for all people ever was a mystery, it no longer is. And must not be! Because we have been rooted in that love, we can be a part of preparing ground for God to root others. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Prayers of the People

Loving God, there is so much to pray about that we wonder where to start. So much suffering around and among us, so much fear of what comes next. So many live with pain. Grief continues to be reality for some. Too many are hungry, in spite of our efforts to feed them. Too many are too quick to take up arms instead of trying to understand each other. Anxiety grows on too many fronts. Corruption becomes what we expect instead of what we

refuse to tolerate. Divisions grow deeper and harder to overcome. Your Word and its promise give us a path of hope through all these things, but we are not sure we are brave enough or faithful enough or whatever we need to be enough to follow where you call, and the path seems too difficult to even set out on. But somehow we still trust you enough to pray, so there must be a glimmer of hope for us. We turn to you, we speak to you, we try to lessen the distance between you and us in the hope that you really do listen and care when we come to you. You love us. You stand by us. You act on our behalf. Grateful for all these things that bind us to you, O God, we bring our prayers to you this day.

Grant that all who need healing may find the balm of your nurture and care, whether their need is physical, spiritual, or come combination of the two. May all who need courage find it in the promise of your faithfulness to your promises in your Word as we read it, proclaim it, and strive to live it so that the world can see its truth and power. May all who need reconciliation and peace find empowerment in Jesus Christ, who came to bring peace to us all. May all who need guidance first admit our need and then claim the blessing of your wisdom freely shared.

Eternal and gracious God, bless and renew us this day. Time moves so fast that we can't keep up. Life always runs ahead of us, urging us to move faster and faster just to keep up. As we slow down long enough to pray this morning, help us to hear the movement of your Spirit among us as surely as we hear the wind in the trees or feel the warmth of the sun and allow ourselves to be reminded that we are not alone. Help us to give thanks for the support and sustenance we have in this family of faith and how those gifts connect us to you and to one another. The unity of your people is broader than we can imagine. Help us to claim it as we pray and hope in you, God who made us, who loves us, and who will guide us to the truth. Hear us as we pray as Jesus taught us to pray when he said: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and*

forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.