

SERMON:

Read Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before God, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the 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 God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

I have a confession to make -a confession that led to an Epiphany for me-

Friday night - I was feeling 'tarasso' - what I preached about last week - that anxiety and fear that swirls around inside of us, leaving me agitated and out of sorts. And you know what it was about? This sermon. I was all stirred up. Not really enjoying my Friday night very much.

I got down on my knees. I realized I was stirred up because I was focused on me. I was worried because I hadn't finished my sermon. I was worried what you would think of me. I was stuck, thinking it was all about me. Really... worried about a 17 minute sermon, when so much is falling apart in this world of ours? Oh you of little faith! I was ashamed - I asked God for forgiveness. How easy it is to slip into 'it's all about me' mode.

It's not about me. It's about us. And not just US, but US rooted in the love of Christ. Because when we see ourselves as rooted in the deep, wide, incomprehensible love of Christ, the US becomes not just us here in this room, not just US as Mennonites, not even just US as Christians, but as this prayer from the letter to the Ephesians started - US as being a part of every family on earth.

I didn't accept this calling to be your pastor to get caught up in 'it's about me' thinking. I came to walk beside you, to learn with you what it looks like to live as the body of Christ. I came that we might remind each other of the words in today's reading - how wide and how long and how high and how deep the love of Christ is. Because we forget it so easily. And when we forget it, we get stirred up and move into a 'it's about me' mode.

So I confess, and I share this epiphany. And I want to focus on stories today - stories about ordinary people who both past and present, are living into this work that MCUSA is naming in this Journey Forward series - this claiming our identity as Mennonites, as Christians, as brothers and sisters, as part of the family of God, which includes all peoples.

But to frame those stories, I want to look for a minute at the reading from this morning. Before this prayer, earlier in the letter, Paul had been reviewing with the Ephesians the amazing fact that the Gospel of Jesus had been opened not just to the Jewish people but also to the Gentiles, which was shorthand for everyone on earth. And then comes verse 14 as Paul begins to tell the Ephesians how he prays for them.

He does not pray that they will be healthy and safe.

He does not pray they will be successful and wealthy.

He does not pray that they will find a way to stand up to political foes in the Roman Empire.

No, he prays for strength by the Spirit to bring Christ more fully into their hearts.

And then he prays they might receive power, but not political power, not worldly clout, not brawny power with which to defeat their enemies.

No, he prays they may receive power to grasp something very nearly ungraspable: how wide and how long and how high and how deep is the love of Christ so that they might be filled up to the very brim of their lives with God's own fullness.¹

That's what I want us to remember. How wide and how long and how high and how deep Christ's love is - and that when we live out of that love we can live in the 'it's about us, not about me' freedom found through God's love.

And so I offer a few stories of this congregation, at its beginning, as told to me by Nel.

UMC was founded on hospitality and being a Mennonite outpost where anyone, but especially Mennonites here in State College, could find a home that was both familiar and challenging. Singing was at the core of their early gatherings, both in homes and in the choir room where they first met. Their singing was so good that it attracted others who heard them, wanting to get in with this fun loving group.

Hospitality meant being intimately involved in each others lives, meeting in homes, sharing meals, camping trips, and over and over reaching out to the students who were here on campus. Nel spoke of getting lists of the Mennonite students and going and knocking on their doors, inviting them to worship, and fellowship of course, too. (That's reflected here in the charter: READ FROM UMC CHARTER - line about providing a home for Menno students)

She told me of when she and Lamar made the decision to stay in State College, Lamar's accepting a position here instead of returning to Goshen. She said that

¹ Hoezee, Scott. https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-12b/?type=lectionary_epistle

Goshen had enough Mennonites. This congregation was formed as a place where Mennonites could claim their heritage, find familiar music, choose their dress codes (this is named in code in the charter as- READ FROM CHARTER). Here anyone was welcomed into a strong sense of Mennonite community, but that right from the beginning this congregation offered a space to ask questions. They were inquisitive, willing to challenge one another, finding meaning and a deeper faith not in blind obedience to bishops and hierarchy, but truly being a priesthood of all believers. But the word that Nel used most to describe those early days here at UMC was fun. Fun! They had lots of fun together. They were young and courageous and had a sense that with God's help, they could do this! They were rooted and grounded in love - like Amy talked about in children's time.

Fellowship and support was foundational to who they were, and continues to be a core value today. Bethany pulled out notes from a conversation you all had with Dave Mischler, our conference minister, back in July 2017 where you envisioned the future of UMC together. In that document our strengths are listed as hosting families for meals, hospitality, honesty in sharing and support of one another, singing, being a priesthood of all believers. Sounds like what was important back then still remains the core of who we want to be today.

And these stories of who this church is, the sense that hospitality is vital to being church, to showing our love not only to each other, but to the entire community, reminds me of stories I've been reading of the early Anabaptists, those who were persecuted and died for their radical beliefs - those of being a community who shared in leadership, turning to Scripture as the authority, not those appointed from the hierarchy of the church.

And so I offer the story of Joris Wippe, who lived in the mid 1550's in Dordrecht, the Netherlands. He was a dyer of cloth, father of 7 children, and was well respected by

not only the dealers with whom he worked but the townspeople. You see, his faith had him reaching out to the less fortunate in his community - sharing food from their garden, their blankets, their clothes. When his religious views came under question, the local authorities wished he would flee so they didn't have to carry out the imperial mandate of capital punishment.

Once caught, they sent Joris to the Hague, hoping to have the case taken out of their hands, but eventually he was sent back to Dordrecht for trial, sentencing and death. Still, the local officials stalled, and stalled. He was so well loved by the community, no one would take part in his execution. The city executioner refused to kill Joris, because he had received food and help from him. For 7 weeks Joris Wippe lay unpunished in the city jail, when finally a soldier was found who would kill him. It was done quietly, at night, to avoid public outcry. During those weeks in prison he wrote letters to his wife and children, reminding them of God's love and provision. Joris may have been killed, but his faith - it challenges me to move away from 'it's about me, to the call 'it's about us, rooted in Christ'. And for those early Anabaptists, they looked beyond the 'us' of family, to include even those who would kill them.²

This church has a history of both wanting to challenge and question religious norms, yet remain connected to the larger Mennonite church. The charter members of this body chose to become a part of Allegheny Conference, even though they started without anyone coming to "plant" a church. No, they didn't ask for money or resources - they were a self-sufficient bunch, relying on each other to do everything from preaching to showing up early to the classrooms on campus, where church as held, because their job that week was to clean up the cigarette butts and get the room ready for worship.

² Oyer, John. *Mirror of the Martyrs*. 1990. Good Books, Intercourse, PA.

They really pushed the limits, following in the footsteps of their Anabaptist forefathers and mothers. Nel tells of when the first requests for baptism came “we discussed it and concluded that nowhere in the Bible it says you need a Bishop for that, but not wanting to offend anybody we checked with conference and they agreed, so the fathers baptized their children.(At that time, there was no discussion yet about Mothers doing the honor!!!!) But what a novelty that was! No ministers,no bishops and yet we were the church!” she said.

We were the church. That meant pushing the limits yet staying connected. It meant being creative, testing new ideas out together, and deepening connections all the while having fun.

Being the church - it’s not a building, a place - it’s a group of people supporting each other to do the work of Christ, of Love in this world.

I was going to share a story of my family, growing up, welcoming in strangers, but I want to turn and look at the global church.

In the latest issue of “A Common Place” a publication that reports on the work of MCC around the world, I read about Irene Paraba, a Bolivian woman who, through training in electrical and plumbing trades, and hairdressing skills, through “El Comedor” - a local organization that partners with MCC, she’s made a new life for herself and her children. Irene learned not only technical skills allowing her to make enough money to send her children to school, but it helped her leave her abusive husband and model a different way of being a Bolivian woman for her family. She’s learning, and modeling for others, what it means to know how deep the love of Christ is, so that they might be filled up to the very brim of their lives with God’s own fullness.

Again, hear these words of Paul:

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.

The prayer that Paul penned to the Ephesians is being lived out in in this corner of Bolivia today.³

For that's what worship, service, fellowship, and the whole life of the church is about. This divine love is not knowledge gained by private study, but love learned in the fellowship of the church. In this larger community we learn the love of Christ -- both Christ's love for us and what it means to love Christ in others, including our enemies.⁴

And so I end with one last story - I think my favorite story of the early Anabaptist martyrs, - maybe I shouldn't say favorite, but the one that compels me the most to strive to give my whole life to the love of God and others. It's about Dirk Willems, an early Anabaptist who showed the truest hospitality of Christ one can offer - turning back to save another, even at the cost of his own life.

Dirk also lived in the Netherlands in the mid-1500's. He was caught, tried and convicted as an Anabaptist in the harsh years of Spanish rule under Duke Alva. Dirk escaped from a palace turned jail by letting himself out a window with a rope made of knotted rags, dropping onto the ice that covered the castle moat. Seeing him escape, a palace guard chased after him. Dirk crossed the ice of a pond safely, as he was very thin from living on prison rations. The guard, better fed than Dirk, broke through the thin ice. Hearing the guard cry for help, Dirk turned back and rescued him. His belief in Jesus' command to love everyone compelled him to turn back and offer help. Dirk was seized and thrown into a small, heavily barred room at the top of a tall church tower, locked into wooden leg stocks. Eventually he was burned to death. To this day, Dirk is remembered as a Christian so compassionate that he risked recapture in order to save the life of his enemy.

³ Bergen, Rachel. *Skills for Life*. A Common Place magazine. Winter 2019.

⁴ Peterson, Brian. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2546.

We may never know that kind of persecution for our faith, I confess, I hope we aren't, but we are still called to love - to love all of creation in such a way that we live out, fulfill, the prayer Paul offered to the early church - living in a way that others- may receive power to grasp something very nearly ungraspable: how wide and how long and how high and how deep is the love of Christ so that all might be filled up to the very brim of their lives with God's own fullness.

May it be so. Amen.