

February 2, 2020

“Rooted: Growing in His Love”

Ephesians 3:14-21, Matthew 7:15-20

A few weeks back I told the longer story of how we came to identify our Main Thing/The Focus of FPC as being “Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, Branching Out to Serve Others.” [I encourage you to go online and listen/watch the kickoff sermon on January 12.] For the 2nd and 3rd sermons, Jason and I focused on being Rooted in Jesus, instead of the many idols we are tempted to serve, worship and root ourselves in. These next two weeks we will focus on “Growing in His Love,” but that doesn’t mean this isn’t all interconnected or that we can’t mention fruit until we get to the “Branching Out” part. Our mission statement isn’t meant to be understood in a linear way; it’s fluid; there is back/forth. It also doesn’t mean that being “Rooted in Jesus” is a one-time moment that we check off our list and move forward from; all of this is ongoing; all of this is connected; like a tree.

This morning, Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3 will be more of my focus, but I’ll also try to help us see how the ‘false prophets’ Jesus mentions in Matthew 7 can stunt our growth and lead to some rotten fruit. [In Eugene Peterson’s translation Jesus warns the people to stay away from ‘false preachers who smile a lot, dripping with practiced sincerity.’ So I will try not to smile while I preach.]

Prayer

Who loves getting annual letters and pictures around Christmas and the New Year?

I love seeing the growth from year to year, but that growth is even more measurable and obvious (even glaring) over long periods of time. The picture you see on the screen was taken with me and the family of George and Rahab Wanjema in 1987 when I lived with them in Kenya after college. One of the top ten days of my life was when I got to go back and visit them when our daughter Jenna was there for the summer at the same time on was on my first trip to Uganda in 2013. I flew in to visit her and see if we could hunt down the Wanjemas. And we found them and – oh my – talk about growing up. The boys and girls were now men and

women; fathers and mothers. Wow! I recently got an email with their most recent family picture; check it out. Now that's measurable growth!

I love long-term pastoring for a number of reasons, but one of them is that you get to see so many changes, growth, etc. One day a kid is showing up to Wednesday Night Live, and the next thing you know they're driving out of the parking lot with nervous parents and a learner's permit.

I also get to see people grow as followers of Jesus, but the life of discipleship isn't measurable in the same way as our height or academic journey from 2nd grade to high school and beyond. Transformation is tricky to track. So much is happening below the surface that nobody can see; even we can't see it. "Slow growth" – or growth that happens almost imperceptibly over long periods of time – doesn't stand out for us. We often miss it. The pace of our 21st century life often leads us to expect speedy results for everything – even when it comes to transformation/growth. But one of the "fruits of the Spirit" is patience (Galatians 5:22). Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13 that "love is patient." This isn't an excuse to NOT change/grow, but a promise that some things – the most important things – take a LONG time. Some fruit takes a lifetime to see, especially if it's "fruit that lasts." (John 15:16) Thank God He doesn't use a 21st century time clock; let's not put others/ourselves on that kind of time clock either. [Be careful of **False Preachers** that promise 'guaranteed and quick results' or 'easy' – as I mentioned last week. Be careful when you feel pressure from preachers. It leads to bad fruit.

In our new mission statement, we wanted to make it clear that the **root source of any growth is Jesus**. But what is it more specifically about Jesus that makes us grow? What's the motivational structure of our change/growth?

In Ephesians 3:14-21 (2nd prayer of letter) Paul says it must be LOVE; more specifically that we would – by the power of the Spirit, be "rooted and grounded in love." (Ephesians 3:17) Eugene Peterson translates this as living in the power of the Spirit "with both feet planted firmly on love." (from The Message) Paul is praying for power, but he doesn't say that focusing on God's power will change us. He's praying that the power of God would help us FOCUS ON – "grasp" or "comprehend" – just how vast God's love for us actually is. He's declaring that

what we call the Good News/Gospel – seen clearly in the love of Christ for us – is the thing (source/root) that changes everything.

You can use power to boss/push people around. And you can get compliance; for awhile. You can use guilt and shame to alter behavior; temporarily. But the only thing that fundamentally changes the motivational structure of our hearts is love. That’s one reason why Paul is praying specifically that (SLIDE) “[We] would 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 the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:18-19)

If growth (of any kind, but especially spiritual growth) is motivated by a desire to please or comply; or if we are trying to grow in our own strength to prove to ourselves or others that we can do it; or if we are seeking to grow and change in order to be accepted and loved by God; or if we think that growing mostly requires that we grit our teeth and push ourselves . . . If any and all of that is the source of our motivation to grow, then our growth will always be short-lived, superficial, and joyless.

We want to be “Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, Branching Out to Serve Others.”

When we say we want to be Growing in His Love . . . we mean being nourished (or rooted) in this endless and uncontainable source of affection that the Father has for us; that He demonstrated in His Son – this wide, deep, long, and high love. We didn’t say our mission is to be Growing in Knowledge, Purity, a More Positive Outlook, Correct Doctrine, Outreach and Mission, or Acts of Justice. Those are all fine fruits **IF** borne out of the VAST love of God. [Jesus and Paul knew the danger of **False Preachers** who would peddle the belief that – **in order to grow** – people needed to obtain a certain mysterious knowledge, or have a particular ethnic identity, or practice a strict adherence to specific rules. Jesus said that would lead to some bad fruit.] That’s why John Calvin said, “Those called to govern [lead] the church should therefore remember that if they want to discharge [carry out] their office truly and properly, they must start off from the love of Christ.” (Commentary on John 21)

Christ's love must be the true source of our growth, fruit, change. And the Love of God goes so far beyond the limited definitions we're given of love. It's not just a loving feeling – but we need to feel it. It's not just a warm and fuzzy niceness, but love is kind; and Jesus was the kindest person to ever walk the planet. Nor is the love of God conditional, temporary, or performance-based. It blows every human expression of love out of the water. It is supernatural! And growing in light of that love is the kind of growth that lasts . . . and branches out with fruit that nourishes those around us and lasts.

Paul wants followers of Jesus to know this love to the depths of their being. But that still might sound a bit like what **WE NEED TO DO**, get, or earn; which is another false teaching. The truth of the matter is that God makes His love known, by the power of His Spirit. God overwhelms us with His love. God initiates the loving relationship. As scripture reminds us: “We love because He first loved us.” (1 John 4:19) Everything – including our growth – starts and ends with the endless love of God.

I came across *Holy Sonnet #14: Batter my heart, three-person'd God*, by John Donne and found some helpful imagery and language about God's endless and overwhelming love for us. Toward the end of the sonnet he confesses that, though he longs to be transformed by God, he is:

. . . betroth'd unto Your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to You, imprison me, for I,
Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, **except You ravish me.**

In other words, ‘Flood me with Your love, God. Overwhelm me. If I'm the bride and You are the Bridegroom, sweep me off my feet, hold me close, and never let me go.’

As we come to the table to celebrate communion this morning, may we be ravished by the love of God in Jesus Christ.