

February 9, 2020

“Rooted: Growing in His Love”

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23, Jeremiah 17:5-8

Last week we talked about measurable growth over time, and how ‘annual letters’ (especially from families with kids) are growth barometers. We send out an annual letter to out-of-town family/friends with a picture or two from the past year. Here we are in Glacier National Park 20 years ago. This is probably 2006, the first time we hiked to Hanging Lake. This year it’s pretty clear we’re all grown up. Measurable growth! There’s someone very special we’ve gotten letters and pictures from over the years. Through Compassion Int. we started sponsoring Adrian in 2009 when he was 5. We got this picture a few years later when he was 9. We got to visit him in Ecuador in 2015 when he was 11. And then this picture arrived a few weeks ago. Adrian is now 15. One day we are little boys and girls; suddenly, we’re young men and women. Physical growth in kids and teenagers is something we all celebrate. But, of course, there are other ways we all grow: emotionally, in wisdom and understanding, in our talents and skills, our sense of responsibility, in friendships, in our ability to trust, hopes and dreams, and in our life of discipleship. We grow in our faith. That’s the hope.

This is what we want to be about at FPC: Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, [so that as we grow in and through our connection to Jesus we can be more fruitfully] Branching Out to Serve Others. Last week we talked about how spiritual growth is harder to measure than our height or length of hair, or academic progress. We also talked about how – at various times and in various ways – our lives produce fruit. In Matthew 7 Jesus told us that our fruit makes it clear whether we are growing in response to God’s great love for us, or growing out of our own efforts, egos, and insecurities. We talked about how lasting transformation results, not from coercion, guilt, shame, our own efforts, or a desire to win God’s approval, but from rooting our lives in the love of God expressed in Jesus Himself. This is why Paul’s main prayer for God’s people was that we would have power from God to grasp and comprehend how “wide and deep and long and high” (Ephesians 3:18) His love is for us. The more we know and see and feel the love of God, the more our hearts are moved; and the more our lives are changed.

But love can be an overused and watered-down word. Last week I introduced us to another word for the huge love God has for us from a sonnet by John Donne (1572-1631). In Holy Sonnet #14, he expresses his desire to grow in God’s grace as well as the reality that he struggles. He admits that – though he longs to be faithful to God – he is:

. . . betroth’d unto [God’s] Your enemy;
[So he pleads to God . . .]
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.**

(John Donne’s *Holy Sonnet #14: Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God*)

Ravish is a pretty loaded word. It apparently set off a discussion with a group of women who meet on Mondays to pray and grow together. We debriefed a bit more about this word at Wednesday in the Word. Some said the word “ravish” – when connected to God’s love for us – was surprising in a good way; others that it was shocking. It conjured up images from the cover of a romance novel. For some it was a very helpful way to jar them into realizing how huge, sweeping and unmanageable God’s love is. For others it felt too violent and overpowering – which I hope you’ll understand was not my intent. I want us to be careful with our language, not just to be politically correct but to be kind and caring. So other ways to convey the wide, deep, long, and high love of God might be to say God pursues us; woos us; sweeps us off our feet; is really into us. He doesn’t just tolerate us or like us; or love us out of obligation. In fact, long before Jesus showed us the huge love of God, the Old Testament prophet Zephaniah painted a beautiful picture of God’s passionate love for us. “The Lord will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, He will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.” (Zephaniah 3:17b) God sings love songs over us.

This sounds sort of over-the-top, doesn’t it? But it’s such a delightful picture, isn’t it?

I’m guessing many of us never learned this verse in Sunday School. Am I right? We more likely got the idea that God really loves responsible boys and girls who fold their hands when they pray and obey their mom and dad. But the ravishing love of God in the lives of others is there – if we really look. We got glimpses of this ‘all-in love’ in Joseph’s forgiving, affectionate, and protective love for his brothers at the end of Genesis. We maybe heard about the connection between the romantic love of a man and woman – in the Song of Solomon – and how we could have that kind of pursuing love from and with God. Probably the story that best illustrates the “ravishing love of God” is found in Luke 15 when the disrespectful and disobedient Prodigal Son comes home. How does the father show his love? “You’re grounded and your mother and I are so disappointed”? NO!!!!!! He runs to his son – ignoring all cultural norms of decency, embraces him, dresses him up in his fancy robe, and throws a huge party. He “ravishes” his son with love that makes it clear the past is the past; that it’s time to live like a son again.

So what would it look like for you and me to let God “ravish us with His love”?

How do we become people who soak up, surrender to, and truly receive God’s love?

I want to ask this question but modify it a bit, using the metaphorical language from our new Mission Statement; language from the Parable of the Sower and Four Soils in Matthew 13. We all know that growing conditions are complex; that the same sower with the same seed doesn’t always produce the same results. Soil conditions matter. Some soil is impenetrable, like a lot of our Valley’s clay-like dirt. What do you have to do if you want good soil around here? Turn it over and amend, amend, amend! If this is our heart when we aren’t open to love, then THIS is where Jesus hopes our hearts and lives would be when it comes to receiving the seeds of His Kingdom.

So here's a new version of the question about how to best invite God to "ravish" us:

What would it take to help amend the soil of our lives SO THAT we received God's seeds of holy, joyful love – SO THAT we grew and flourished like the trees in Psalm 1, Jeremiah 17, John 15?

There's so much in Jesus' Parable of the Sower:

- 1) The Enemy snatching away the very thing God wants to plant in us for our good. [There's nothing that the Enemy would like more than God's love NOT sinking in.]
- 2) The need to deal with the shallow, rocky, and hardened soil of our hearts. [Without depth, nothing much will grow when life heats up.]
- 3) How wealth and the worries of this world will choke out growth before it can flourish.

For just a few minutes, I want to talk about how to cultivate good soil. There are things we can do to be better recipients of God's love; soak it up, understand it, feel it, celebrate it, and live joyfully and gratefully in response to it. [I need to emphasize that the steps we can take to cultivate a richer and more receptive life are a response to God's great love – not a way to earn more of His love. His love is already infinite and unconditional for each one of us.

How is it that we can better open up, so that our lives can be amended with God's ravishing love?

-Scripture (Psalm 1 and Jeremiah 17); not rushing through the Bible in a year, but really chewing on it

-Prayer; conversation with God; give and take

-Relationships with Others; especially those who remind us of God's ravishing love

-Service; Branching Out in ways that force us to rely on God, and help us see His love in action

-Worship; focusing our attention and energies on who God is and what He's done (Corporate/Solo)

These are all pretty predictable and the kinds of things you'd expect to hear from a pastor in church. And they're all great ways to amend our hearts. But there's one more suggestion I never heard much growing up – and even in most of my adult years:

-Silence; Sabbath; getting to know God's heart and our true selves; slowing down and noticing, listening to Him; being instead of doing.

All of this is really an outgrowth of Humble and Grateful Obedience

Ultimately, we have to trust that the Farmer/Father knows best how to cultivate optimal growing conditions. And all this stuff I just mentioned is consistently commanded in His Word.

Question: Is God our authority or do we want to call our own shots? [Yes and Yes.]

If we consistently order our lives around these practices/disciplines we will more regularly and intentionally be in a place where the seeds of His Kingdom's love, truth, and grace will penetrate our **fearful or prideful hearts**. And when His seeds of love get into our hearts, things change; not necessarily all at once, but over time.

What does this look like practically?

As I mentioned last week, I had an very practical experience that illustrates what I'm saying. **[I shared a longer story about our most recent home improvement project – shower doors – and how my insecurities welled up once again. Shelly and I have been learning about how to navigate this reality for years. But this time (since I took the lead and read the directions and grasped the project) I also brought some arrogance and pride to the table. And when things weren't coming together as well as we hoped, both my insecurity AND my pride took over. And it made Shelly's heart race. She reminded me we were on the same team. She's familiar with the insecurity but not the home improvement arrogance. At one point she asked, "How am I supposed to help you with both insecurity and arrogance at the same time?" I didn't have an answer then, but I have one now.]**

The only remedy for both insecurity and pride is God's immeasurable love. The largeness of it is humbling; the kindness and caring of it builds us up. God's ravishing love sets us free to serve and speak and listen and confess and "bear fruit that lasts." (Joh 15:16)

In our EHS material this week we read the following: "True freedom comes when we no longer **need** to be special in other people's eyes because we know we are loveable and good enough in Christ." (Peter Scazzero in *Day By Day*)

One day, I'm going to be so free because of God's huge love in me that the most disastrous home improvement project ever won't make me any less secure in who I am; nor will the most successful home improvement project make me the least bit arrogant. One day, I won't make my frustration noises, and Shelly's heart will beat with calm consistency. And we'll celebrate the very practical effects of God's love going deep into the soil of my heart; our hearts.

Hey folks, life is filled with 'improvement projects' of all kinds; growth opportunities; challenges; defining moments when we find out what really motivates and moves us. Let's make sure we are Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His [Ravishing] Love, [because then, when we] Branch[ing] Out to Serve Others . . . everyone will want to know the source of our beautiful fruit and shade. And then it will be easier – not easy but easier – to tell them about Who this fruit and shade come from.