

July 28, 2024
“Rooted and Grounded in Love”
Ephesians 3:14-19 / Mark 6:35-52
Pastor Tim

You'll see from the sermon title, “Rooted and Grounded in Love,” that we are talking this morning – yet again – about love. It's crazy how it keeps coming up!

In the Christian context, and really in the broader spiritual context, love is ultimately THE answer to ALL of our questions.

Love God with EVERYTHING you have, with all of yourself, AND love your neighbor as you love yourself. Jesus is as clear as he can be.

But if love is the answer to all of our questions, that really just means that love is always the appropriate starting place in our discernment. In our decision-making. In our dialogue. In our engagement with ourselves and with the world around us.

So the underlying question remains: “What does love actually look like in this situation, in this place, in this relationship, under these circumstances?” What does love actually look like?

What does love ACTUALLY look like when navigating the delicate balance between love of neighbor and love of self. Knowing that our ongoing capacity for love is largely dependent on our ongoing practice of self-love, and self-care; but also knowing that love can, at times, be self-sacrificial. Love may, at times, require self-sacrifice.

What does love ACTUALLY look like in our interpersonal relationships, and on wider scales – on the national and global levels? What does love ACTUALLY look like in terms of budgets and laws and policies?

So the answer, of course, to the question, “What does love actually look like?”, is not always clear or simple. The answer is not one-size-fits-all. The answer is informed by the particularities of context, circumstances, personalities, and on and on.

Jesus is quick to elevate what is presumably the most difficult context, calling us to love EVEN our so-called enemies. Those whose presence is, whose words or actions are – or

represent, or at least feel like – a threat to us and our well-being, or to those we love and their well-being. Or a threat to entire groups of people, or to the Earth itself. To the common good of neighborhood, community, city, state, nation, region, world, planet.

Those for and toward whom love may instinctively be furthest from our minds and hearts. You need not necessarily like them, but love them too, Jesus insists. Hard as it may be. Figure it out.

Our reading from Ephesians includes this prayer, this blessing from the author – who, by the way, most scholars don't believe was the apostle Paul, but more likely one of his disciples, writing in his 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 God's Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love."

Steve Garnaas-Holmes calls this passage a "blessing salad." May you be blessed with strength of inner being – with power through God's Spirit. May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith. May you be rooted and grounded in love – and not only that, the author goes on to 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."

What is the breadth and length and height and depth of GOD'S love, DIVINE love – made known in (BUT NOT ONLY IN, we always need to be clear) Jesus, the Christ.

As those being rooted and grounded in Divine love like the saints who have gone before, MAY that rootedness and grounding give you the POWER to COMPREHEND and so ultimately to PRACTICE such love. The full range of such love – its breadth and length and height and depth.

Love that extends well beyond the limits we so often put on it. Love FROM which, as Paul's letter to the Romans also reminds us, neither height, nor depth, ... nor "death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, not powers, ... nor anything else in all creation can separate us.

For when you are able to do that, to comprehend AND practice such love, you WILL be “filled with all the fullness of God.” The kingdom of God, Jesus says, will be in you.

But hear within this litany of blessings the emphasis on strength and power. Strength of inner being. Power through God's Spirit. POWER to comprehend and practice Divine love because it is not always easy. That's WHY we have to stay rooted and grounded – like trees, the very picture of strength and resilience in the natural world.

Love has to be in you, and it has to STAY in you, if love is gonna come out. We have to stay rooted and grounded in love if we are to bear the faithful fruit of love.

We can take the natural gardening metaphor as far as it takes us. Love is hard work. It's hands-dirty, but life-giving, hard work. It is discipline. It is faithful diligence to plant and sow, to nurture and tend, to water, to prune, to weed, to protect against pests.

Because as any lazy or ambivalent or distracted or overwhelmed gardener knows, the weeds and the pests will take over if you let them.

Fear – and the anger and hatred and division and everything else that inevitably comes with it – will take over if you let it. It will suck the love out of life, and the life out of love. Love casts out fear, but so can fear cast out love.

So we have to do everything, EVERYTHING, we can to stay rooted and grounded. Spiritual practices of all kinds help us to do that. Individual AND collective practices, because we cannot do this hard work of cultivating love alone.

We root and ground, we STAY rooted and grounded, OR sometimes we have to RE-root and RE-ground, in community – which is itself a spiritual practice. Intentionally engaging and building community.

We are loved and so learn to receive love in community.

We experience and practice love – which inevitably means we often fail at love – in community.

We learn what love does not look like, and so what it does look like, in community.

We discern, together, what love looks like in the world around us. Especially when the practical answer is not so clear or not so easy.

It is in community, Christian and otherwise, where we are reminded that love is indeed the answer to all of our questions. That love, indeed, is the one and only starting place from which we are called to engage the world around us.

Christian community, spiritual community, is not about doctrine and rules. As the late pastor and theologian, William Sloane Coffin, put it – and as I know I have shared at Calvary before: “Rules are at best signposts, never hitching posts. Personally, I doubt where there is such a thing as a Christian rule. ... And if we exalt freedom as Christians, we must remember that freedom is grounded in love.”

He goes on: “Though setting no outer rules, love exacts much from within. As Paul Ramsay says, ‘If everything is permitted which Christian love permits, everything is demanded which Christian love requires.’ So let others say, ‘Anything goes.’ The Christian asks, ‘What does love require?’”

The Christian, no more or less than the Buddhist, the Jewish, the Muslim, the Hindu, the atheist, the human being, asks: “What does love REQUIRE?” And what love requires is, in truth, all that God requires – as the prophet Micah so powerfully and clearly reminds us: “God has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does God require of you but do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”

When you do that, when we manage to do that, the possibilities are endless. Divine love takes us beyond our limitations, even beyond our imaginations, as we heard in our Gospel reading this morning.

Love, say, that miraculously turns five loaves of bread and two fish into a blessing – an abundant meal enough for thousands. “And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.”

As Steve Garnaas-Holmes notes: “We can exhaust ourselves wondering: did they all actually have bread but wouldn’t share till the pattern was set? Or did everybody decide one nibble was enough? Or is it a parable, a purely symbolic story ... Or did Jesus really

make 5,000 lunches appear out of thin air? Doesn't matter. It's not a story about culinary magic. It's about abundance. There's more than enough. In all our worries, in all our struggles, hoping for grace, there's more than enough. Repeatedly Jesus encourages us to forsake the blasphemy of scarcity. When we put everything in God's hands there's always more than enough."

Or love, say, that calms both fears and storms.

"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid," Jesus says. In the original Greek it's more like, "I am. Don't be afraid." Jesus, rooted and grounded in love, assures his disciples after somehow walking across water to be with them, in the midst of the storm. He joins them in the boat, because ... that's what Jesus did.

That's what God does – joins us in the boat, in the midst of the storm, until the winds cease.

As John van de Laar suggests, in prayer:

*The worst storms, Jesus, are the ones caused
by our fear,
when we grow afraid of losing our power,
or we grow suspicious of the power of others,
when we refuse to acknowledge your mysterious authority;*

*Yet, it's in the storm that we find our capacity to love.
In releasing our weak claim to power
and opening to your reign,
we discover a new way of seeing ourselves –
as called and useful and beloved –
and the other, whoever they may be –
as dignified and precious and beloved.*

*Here in the storm, Jesus, we need you, and we need each other,
and the love you give us to share,
leads us through sacrifice and self-giving*

*to peace and calm,
if only we will loose our hold on fear.*

Here, here.

Love can and does feed the hungry. Within God's love, there's more than enough.

Love can and does calm both fears and storms. Do not be afraid.

Love is as love does, but love can only DO if and when we – individually and collectively – are rooted and grounded in it. Strong, powerful, resilient. Loving God with everything we have, with all of ourselves; loving our neighbors, even our enemies, as we love ourselves.

Allow me to close with a slight adaptation to the song we used this morning to sing our way in:

*May the pool of love we will gather here
Spread its wings and fly far and near
From the depths of our hearts to the farthest star
May our love bless everyone
May our love bless everything*

May it be so.