

Praying for You...and Us

Ephesians 3:14-21
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First Presbyterian Church
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Thomas Merton was an acclaimed American monk and writer, known for his spiritual wisdom, dedication to simplicity as a way of life, and his deep concern about the world, working tirelessly for peace, tolerance, and equal rights. But before he became a monk, Merton was an elite, getting the finest education money can buy.

To Merton's friends, his decision to become a monk made no sense. "Look at what he's giving up!" they exclaimed, shaking their heads. Yet, to Merton, the opportunity to spend his days rooted in God and grounded in the gospel was a liberation.

Here's how he describes his journey from city life to the simple, austere world of the Abbey of Gethsemani, which is in Kentucky:

"Everything in modern city life is calculated to keep man from entering into himself and thinking about spiritual things. Even with the best of intentions a spiritual man finds himself exhausted and deadened and debased by the constant noise of machines and loudspeakers, the dead air and the glaring lights of offices and shops, the everlasting suggestions of advertising and propaganda."

We can relate to that, can't we? It's so hard to be rooted in God and grounded in the gospel amid our complicated, over-scheduled lives and all the noise and distractions of the world around us. But that's just what the Apostle Paul is longing for us to be – rooted in God and grounded in the gospel, even amid all the busyness and distractions of modern life.

Paul was writing to the church in Ephesus, which was a blend of newly converted Gentiles and Jews. He was very concerned with the divisiveness he saw among these otherwise faithful Christians, as they struggled to get along amid their differing backgrounds and practices.

"For this reason," says Paul, "I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name." And then he prays for them. He prays a very specific prayer. He prays a very powerful prayer. He prays a very challenging prayer, for us."

Why is it so hard for people to get along with one another? It's like a cancer moving through society, a spirit of bickering and fighting, a spirit of belittling and vilifying others, anyone with a different perspective or opinion.

Speaking of belittling, there was once an airline pilot passing over an airport. He calls the air traffic controller and asks what time it is. "What airline are you flying?" comes the response.

“What airline am I flying? What possible difference does it make? I want to know what time it is.”

The controller replies, saying, “It makes all the difference in the world. If you’re with United Airlines, it’s 1300 hours. If you’re with American, it’s 3 p.m. But if you’re with Delta, the big hand is on the 12 and the little hand is on the three. And if you’re with Southwest, it’s Tuesday.”

Why is there so much bickering and belittling these days. We’ve got to find a cure for such dangerous and destructive behavior and attitudes.

And perhaps the answer can be found in Paul’s prayer for us. “I pray,” says Paul, “that ... you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.”

Here, Paul points to three out of four essentials to achieving peace and love amid a warring world of divisiveness and hate. The first is to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit as our inner source of strength.

This means that whenever we are challenged or feel attacked, we respond from a place of spiritual inner strength, knowing that nothing that this world throws at us can threaten us where it really matters, threaten our core selves as loved and accepted and protected by God.

Then Paul adds to his prayer for us, saying, “... And that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith....” The heart is where our intentions arise; it’s the stepping off point of all our thoughts and actions.

Does Christ dwell in your heart? Does Christ guide your intentions? Or do you give in to or fall under baser intentions – things like jealousy, the fear of scarcity, a need to control people or outcomes, the desire to be better or smarter than the next guy?

All of these lead to infighting, manipulation and belittling. That’s no way to live; no way to get ahead. No, let Christ guide your intentions.

This brings us to third thing we need to get along in this world, in addition to an inner sense of spiritual strength and right intentions when drawing on it. We need a good foundation to rest upon.

Paul prays that we would be “rooted and grounded in love.” If you’re rooted and grounded in love there’s no way you’re going to be trying to get one over on others, whether they be family, friends, neighbors or enemies.

Two farmers disagreed on just where the property line was and where a fence should be, and this dispute grew into a lawsuit. Finally, one of the farmers sold out.

When the guy who purchased the farm moved in, he was met by Farmer Smith, who was agitated and said to his new neighbor, "They tell me you have bought this farm, and I just want to inform you that you have bought a lawsuit."

Asked to explain, he said, "Well, the fence, being located where it is, cheats me out of two feet of my land."

"Then," said the newcomer, "we will move it back four feet."

"No," said Farmer Smith, "that is more than I ask."

"Well," said the purchaser, "I would rather have peace with my neighbors than a few feet of earth!"

"If that is the way you feel," said Farmer Smith, "then the fence stays just where it is and the lawsuit is off."

That could have gone either way. The new guy could have lost four feet of land. But either way, he had peace with his neighbor.

What is peace with your neighbor worth to you, when it comes to all the conflict in this world? I think it's priceless, don't you?

If we come from a place of inner spiritual strength, taking direction from the Lord in our heart-of-hearts, and resting on the foundation of God's love - loving God and loving neighbor - nothing can knock us down or shake our sense of safety and well-being.

This brings us to the fourth thing that's essential in a well-lived, faithful and blessed life, and a world of peace, love and abundance. And that fourth thing is spiritual vision or insight.

In a 1955 documentary, Helen Keller was asked the question, "Can you see a world?" She answered, "I can see, and that is why I can be happy in what you call the dark, but which to me is golden. I can see a God-made world, not a man-made world."

This level of spiritual insight is the fourth thing Paul prays that we cultivate and cling to. "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend ... the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with ... the fullness of God."

Paul wants this world – our world – to be filled with the fullness of God. And for that to ever come about, we have to see the world through God's eyes, not our own.

The simple truth is that where we see a reason for fear, a reason to fight, a reason to give up, God sees a reason to come together in the knowledge and love of God, and discover together what a blessed, heavenly world that brings.

So, which would you rather rely on – your own strength or God’s? Which intentions would you rather follow – your own or the Lord’s? Where do you want to be grounded – in fear or in love? And what kind of a world do you envision – one of conflict or peace?

Hard to imagine, I know, given the world we live in. And yet, Paul concludes his prayer with these encouraging words, which I will leave with you today:

“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 him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.”

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of us all, we thank you for this place of worship and this time of prayer. We are thankful for our health, and grateful we are able to be here for this time of worship. We pray for those who are ill, and ask that you surround them and those who care for them with your loving and healing presence. For those suffering the pain of loss, we ask for your peace which passes all understanding.

Lord, we want so much to help others and sometimes we do not know what to do. Help us to be focused on the life of your Son so that by his example, we might be faithful in our service to others.

Breathe on us the breath of new life; break down the walls of our resistance, O God, so that we might do what you would have us do. Instill in us enthusiasm for the tasks before us.

Enliven our ordinary moments into occasions for worship and joy as we serve you in all that we do, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to say when we pray

**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 forever. Amen.**