

“Rooted and Grounded”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 26, 2009

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 145:10-18
Ephesians 3:14-19

Last Thanksgiving, after everyone had finished eating, we all went outside for some well-needed movement. Three generations gathered on the front lawn – aunts and uncles and cousins and nieces and nephews. The kids were all running around, kicking balls, doing cartwheels, and riding scooters. Since it was such a nice evening, other families – with their aunts and uncles and cousins and nieces and nephews – decided to do the same. The decision was made to take a family photo, and my eldest cousin announced that he wanted “everybody” to get together for a picture. My five-year old nephew ran across the street and shouted, “hey, everybody; come on over!”

This presented an awkward moment as we needed to explain to James that “everybody” only meant those in our extended family. It did include “everybody” who had come to Kentucky from Atlanta and Connecticut and Cleveland, but did not include the neighbors. Admittedly, the explanation was confusing to a five-year old. Maybe his more expansive vision of “everybody” has something to teach us all.

Our New Testament reading begins abruptly with the phrase: “for this reason.” For what reason? It is because God has revealed to Paul the same message that Jesus proclaimed during his ministry: that the love of God is for everyone. Specifically, it means that Gentiles have been included as heirs to the promises of God. They are also chosen to be members of the body of Christ. It is “for this reason” that Paul prays that those reading his letter may be strengthened in spiritual power, love and knowledge.

Paul writes this letter to the Ephesians while he is in prison. He has suffered much for the Lord: having been beaten, stoned, shipwrecked and imprisoned multiple times. It would have made a lot of sense for him to pray for his own safety. And yet, he writes to his congregation in Ephesus, praying that Christ would dwell with them, not him. He prays that they might come to know the height and depth and breadth of God’s love for them. Although imprisoned, he understands the freedom that God has given to him and wants them to experience the same feeling of peace and joy.

When we read Paul’s words translated into English, it may seem that everybody who is addressed by the pronouns “you” and “your” are individuals. But, in the Greek text, all of these pronouns are plural. The readers are being addressed as a corporate body. While each of the things that Paul prays for are good for the individual, they are particularly appropriate for the church as a whole. For most of us, we are strengthened and sustained by the witness of other believers. This may be the witness of those who, in the past, wrote hymns and made sacrifices and prayed unceasingly. But it also refers to those who sit beside us in worship, or share stories with us in small groups, or show love and mercy through their selfless actions.¹

¹ Arland J. Hultgren, “Commentary on the Second Reading”

Paul describes life as praying without ceasing. It is not just our formal prayers and moments of silence that constitute “lifting our hearts to God.” We pray in this place so that we might be able to pray in other places. We pray the words that Jesus taught to his disciples so that we might recognize that the holiness of God surrounds us not just when we are praying, but at all times and in all places. As Christians, we acknowledge that every part of our lives is given to God as a prayer.

When we pray, when we live with the understanding that God surrounds us, then everything changes. We let go of the delusion that we are the center of the universe. We realize that the person who cuts us off in traffic might be a single mother who is rushing home after ten hours of work, needing to pick up her kids from daycare, get dinner on the table, and spend a few precious moments with her children before rushing off to a parent-teacher conference at their school. We recognize that the disinterested, pierced clerk who is giving us change is worried about going to college, waiting to hear if there will be any financial aid available. We can see that the homeless man wandering down the street is a slave to addictions which we can’t imagine in our worst nightmare.

When we pray, when we recognize that God surrounds us, we will also be able to see ourselves differently. When we’re weary from the responsibilities of family, work and church, God’s presence will lead us back to clarity. When the hard realities of life break in, when we are feeling broken, we pray with an understanding far beyond our knowing that God is waiting and working to put us back together again.

When we pray, God gives us the courage to take risks. We learn to trust not just in ourselves, in those things that we know, but in something that is much larger than us. We live with a persistent, if not always clear, sense of the holy that is within and among and around us.²

It was such an amazing experience to take part in a “Prayer Safari” this past week: to teach and learn about the expansiveness of God with forty-five children and almost the same number of youth and adult volunteers. The whole experience affirmed in me what an amazing thing the body of Christ can be; how magically and mystically the presence of God can be revealed when we gather together as a body: when we sing and pray, when we beat drums and dance, when we share stories and play games, when we collect for the needy and nurture friendships.

One of the most obvious things I realized this past week is what incredible young people we have in this church. A lot of them are members of the church, that most of you folks know, but some of them are a part of this body of Christ not through membership, but because they are neighbors of members, or grandchildren of members, or students in our preschool or friends and neighbors of students and grandchildren or visitors who have not formally joined the church. Everybody who took part in this year’s VBS contributed their own energy and imagination.

² Brett Younger, “Praying for God” in *Lectioary Homiletics*, July 2006.

A big part of the reason that the kids were so amazing this past week was the volunteers – youth and adult – and how fully they committed themselves to guiding and teaching the kids. This is what Paul was talking about when he wrote to the Ephesians as being “rooted and grounded in love.” (v. 17) Although there was a great deal of planning and effort that contributed to a great week, it was also grace that gave this body of Christ the ability and desire to respond and act as Christians.³

Each day last week, the songs that the kids sang this morning, plus several others, were sung during our gathering time at the beginning of the day, then by each of the four groups as they rotated through their stations, and then sung again at each day’s closing. In addition, every family was given a CD of the music, so we also would hear these songs while traveling to and from VBS. We heard them a lot. If it was just me, I would have changed the CD or turned the channel a long time ago. But that is what learning to pray without ceasing in the body of Christ is all about. Each time we sing, every time we pray, we acknowledge the presence of God and the unlimited potential of God working in and through the gathered community.

Individually, we limit ourselves by what we think is possible, but together, we can be reminded that what God imagines for our lives can be far richer and greater what we think or believe. Churches and the ministries in which they engage remind us that we are not bound by the possibilities we see, or even imagine. God invites us to new things; to work in new ways; to pray for even more than we can imagine.

Before he prays this prayer for the Ephesians, Paul gets down on bended knee. This was not a typical Jewish posture for prayer, but one he adopted from the Gentiles. He not only welcomed them and accepted them as full heirs to God’s plan of salvation, Paul chose to pray like them, and with them, even from a jail cell in another part of the world. He wanted them, like him, to be rooted and grounded in love. And so, just as he dreamed for them, he committed himself fully to God, refusing to be limited by his own situation or his own imagination – and to pray without ceasing. AMEN.

³ Joretta Marshall in *Lectioary Homiletics*, July 2006.