

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Spirit of God: Foundation of Love”
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Psalm 116; Ephesians 3:14-21

The second reading today comes from Ephesians. And while this letter is titled for the Ephesians the letter was also intended to circulate around to other churches as general advice and encouragement from Paul. So it was passed from church to church and has found its way to us in this church today. Starting at verse 14 Paul writes

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ 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, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

This is a wonderful prayer for a growing church, Paul is hopeful, encouraging, even upbeat. But what we miss by not reading the previous chapter is that Paul is actually in prison. So while his tone is upbeat, his circumstances are far from ideal. He has been put in prison because of his work spreading the gospel. While in prison Paul is not able to physically be with the churches he founded. He cannot sit with them to moderate disputes, he cannot put his arm around their shoulders and teach them, he cannot be there to help them navigate every challenge that comes their way.

And the church is facing a unique challenge. Their leaders, the apostles, are beginning to die. Martyrdom has already taken James the brother of Jesus, The apostle mark has passed away, and in two short years the rock stars of the early church, Peter and Paul, will also be gone.

Leaderless the church will have to figure out how to navigate the larger culture. A culture where the roman empire is constantly at war. At this time in Syria governments are fighting for control and the innocent citizens are caught in the cross fire. Many people are fleeing for their lives into safer countries. In the kingdom of Icenii the king has decided to let his daughters inherit his throne. A progressive move on his part but when he dies the Roman army comes in and publicly rapes the princesses. The larger culture turns a blind eye on the injustice because “soldiers will be soldiers.” In Pompeii, 20,000 people in the city are packing up their lives to find a new home because they are afraid the recent earthquake will also set off the nearby volcano.

The world the early Christians are being asked to step into is far from perfect. And without their beloved teachers to lean on they are worried about their future. They are unsure they will be able to become the people they want to be. And so the church is facing a sort of graduation. They have been taught by the best teachers Jesus could find but are now being asked to make their own way in the world.

The world the class of 2017 is being asked to step into is still far from perfect. The problems of war, rape, and natural disasters are still headlines. For those of us who have worked so hard to teach and protect the graduates, we may feel like we are in that prison with Paul. Watching from afar as our loved ones face the harsh world. Forced to trust that what we have taught them was actually learned or even the right thing to teach in the first place.

And for those of us who are graduates and are starting a new chapter of life it is scary to be on our own. Maybe right now it feels pretty good but the day will come when we will feel truly alone. When we need a mentor and all our favorite teachers are miles away. A moment will come when we have to rely on what we've learned, make decisions for ourselves, set goals that are reasonable yet challenging. Those moments will make us wonder why we ever dreamed about leaving home and being on our own in the first place.

The struggle to be on our own, and the struggle to let a loved one move on is exactly what Paul and the church are dealing with. But Paul does not seem very worried in this letter. This isn't a letter from a concerned parent. In fact he almost sounds excited that he is in prison and the church has to give it a go without him. Paul has confidence that the church has what it takes. He has lived among them and seen the church in action. There is no doubt in his mind the church will continue to thrive. Paul sees this as an opportunity for the church to test what they have learned and solidify who they are, not just followers of Paul but as individual independent believers.

But Paul also knows the church will have moments when they doubt themselves so he writes this prayer to be a reminder of what it takes to be strong independent people of God.

He begins by reminding the church they have an inner strength that is powered by the holy spirit. **POWERED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT!** The Holy Spirit does astonishing things in the Bible, and Paul is saying that power is available to every single believer. SO Paul isn't worried about the church finding their way without him, they have the holy spirit. Nothing is going to stand against the church when they have a power that can move mountains, a power that can calm raging storms. A power that can bring the dead back to life. They will be fine as long as they remember to tap into that power.

Power is a tricky thing. Power is the reason wars are fought. Power can lead people astray, but Paul is still not worried the church will lose its path. He reminds the church they have also been taught how to use this power because they are rooted and grounded in love. A love that is wider and higher and longer and deeper than they could ever comprehend. Paul is not worried that this power will be miss handled because he has seen the church show astonishing love, to one another and to outsiders. As long as they stay rooted and grounded in love they will never be off the path.

After reminding the church of the power they have access to and their grounding in love Paul sets up a challenge for them. He tells them to remember that God will do far more with their lives than they can even imagine, if they only work to give God the glory.

Paul knows about accomplishing more with God. This is a man whose plan was to be your basic run of the mill roman citizen. His plan was to follow along, kill Christians and end the Jesus movement. Instead God interrupts his plan and sets him up to be an evangelical rock star. God makes Paul a spokesperson for Jesus like the world had never seen! It involved some struggle, Paul was blind for a stint, was thrown in prison a few times, but he has inspired generations to follow Jesus. His words have lasted nearly 2000 years and he is still talked about today. Not many basic run of the mill roman citizens being talked about still today. Astonishing!

And the Bible is filled with people who accomplish more when they keep God close. Moses' plan was to be a simple shepherd until a bush starts burning in front of him. Joseph, the one with the amazing coat, wanted to continue the family business until his brothers sold him into slavery. Mary just wanted to be married to a nice guy until an angel told her she was pregnant. None of their plans were extravagant until God gets involved. The simple shepherd Moses ends up freeing a group of slaves and founding a new nation. Astonishing! Joseph doesn't end up running the family business but he does end up running Egypt. Astonishing! Mary gets the guy plus she raises a son who saves the world from sin. Astonishing! Their lives end up astonishingly better once God is involved. Easier? Maybe not. But defiantly a better plan in the long run.

Graduates you will hear all sorts of advice in the coming weeks, but Pauls' advice has lasted nearly 2000 years. Trust the power of the Holy Spirit to strengthen you, root yourself in love, and do all things with God because God will help to live an astonishing life.

I certainly will be taking the advice as a fellow graduate. And being reminded that I have the power of the Holy Spirit it seems ridiculous now that I spent so many nights worrying if I was going to get through a class, especially Hebrew and Greek. But remembering our inner strength in the moment is hard. We won't always feel that inner strength, it is hard to see anything else other than our current struggle. But if we acknowledge the spirit, in retrospect, if we take the time now to look back and see "oh that's how I got through that tough time." Then the next time we find ourselves worrying at 3 am we can remember that the spirit got us through the last struggle and is working to get us through this one.

I'll be honest, this next piece of advice seems like a waste of time to tell these graduates. Stay rooted and grounded in love? I know you've got this one figured out. Two weeks ago I asked the underclassmen in youth group to talk a little about the graduates. What would they miss, what would they remember. What legacy would the class of 2017 leave on our church. The overwhelming response was their love. The youth recalled times they were welcomed into the group by one of the graduates. They told me about being on the Mexico mission trip and not knowing many people, but feeling supported by the graduates. They said they see them more like older siblings than just someone who goes to the same church. As they shared stories it was obvious these graduates have set down their roots. Deeply imbedded in love. SO just

like Paul is sure the early church is ready to face the world, we too can be sure these graduates are ready for whatever is coming next.

And what is coming next is a bit of a mystery, for the most part. We can plan, planning is a big deal, graduates if you haven't already heard you need to constantly know where you will be in 1 year, 5 years, and 10 years. You must have a plan in place! If you can't figure that out your doomed to fail. At least that is the sentiment you will face in the world. Plans aren't bad, people who don't plan often end up binge watching an entire show on Netflix. I fully admit to being a procrastinator and have had to learn how to plan so I don't have to pull as many all nighters.

Plans help us clearly lay out what our hopes and dreams are. Which should never be ignored because God has a way of pulling on our hearts and minds through our hopes and dreams. They are the reins God uses to keep up on our path. SO plan! Make a 1 year plan, a 5 year plan, a 10 year plan, but also be open to God interrupting that plan, because the 1 year, 5 year, 80 year plan that God has for you is astonishing!

This past fall First Theater Guild presented the musical "Little Women" which two of our graduates were in. In this musical the character Jo sings a song called "Astonishing" and in it she celebrates the great adventure of going off and finding out who she is. She knows that she may even find herself in unexpected places.

God's plan may lead us through strange territory, the path may be a bit more zig zagged than we want, God's timing will probably be slower than we think we can stand, but God has a plan. A plan that will do more with your life than you could ever believe possible. So if you find yourself in a place you never expected to be, like freeing people from slavery, or running a government, or raising an extraordinarily talented child, or preaching in a pulpit, embrace the unexpected and know that you are astonishing!