

Grounded in Love
July 29, 2018

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 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, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I 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, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 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, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:14-21)

“That you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” “That Christ may dwell in your hearts.”

Have you noticed how popular yard signs have become? Front yards used to only display flags, and the options were quite limited to the stars and stripes or maybe a state flag or a military branch or an alma mater on game day. Then the options expanded a bit with the addition of seasonal and holiday flags, the Halloween flag and the snowman. It used to be that if one had a message you wanted to share with the world, one would have to commit to a long term messy bumper sticker, or, less common and more flexible, a pin. But in recent years yard signs have been popping up everywhere with all kinds of things on them. Like political yard signs used to do every four years when I was growing up in NH, only now it is all the time and everywhere. And maybe this is not much of a surprise given the times we live in and the utility of making clear statements of conviction amidst the hyperventilating news cycle. We know for our tradition that while we can and should avoid being partisan and polemical, faith never exists apart from the political. Which is simply to say our faith leads us towards certain convictions about how we are to live our lives and how we are to live them together.

One of the more popular signs these days is one that states: “Hate has no home here.” I suspect that persons who care enough to make the statement, to spend \$22 or \$16 on Amazon and have the sign shipped to them and display it on their property are good people with good intentions. Perhaps there are others in the congregation who have this sign themselves. But there is, the wisdom of our tradition would instruct us, a certain aspirational quality to this sign, which again, is not to say anything derogatory about those who display it. What I mean by aspirational is the way the sign serves as both a declarative statement and a kind of reminder to one’s self and one’s neighbors to avoid slouching toward the cheap comfort in which hate sneaks up on us.

I’ve been thinking lately, not in any kind of profound way, more kind of a sophomoric and satirical way, about how it’d be kind of funny to see a variation of this sign. Same color scheme and font but it would read something that was a little more realistic. Perhaps something

like: “Hate doesn’t live here...full-time, but actually, hate keeps an apartment on the third floor, mostly keeps to himself, and is a little grumpy when he comes and goes, but yeah, hate gets mail here and at some point he’ll be back.” It probably wouldn’t be a big seller. But the target audience, those to whom the sign might better fit, would be much larger.

To be clear, hate is not something to welcome or around which you’d want to leave your door unlocked. But as disciples, as disciples who are emboldened to confront the reality of our own shortcomings by the fact that God already invites us to stand and be forgiven for them, there is some ugly truth in this imaginary sign. As disciples who follow after Peter, whose faith is steadfast and like an unshakable rock, until of course those three denials came shockingly quick and easy, there is within our persons a kind of hostility and denial of God. Our tradition speaks in terms of being descendants of Adam, of a fundamental bug that has been in our wiring from the start. Hate does not politely wait for invitation to enter, to move in an unpack, to set up a home with us. It just comes regardless of whether we are attentive or aware or have any hope of resisting it.

And because it will be better to just get all this ugly out at once and not come back to it, in considering the possibility and degree to which hate might live with us, think of the seductive power of being entitled to a grudge. Consider honestly, again, it helps to remind ourselves that we are already forgiven no matter how ugly and disappointed we might be when we look unflinchingly at our own experience, consider how reluctant we are to forgive when we have been wronged or mistreated. It’s like a sick kind of leverage or something, this grudge-clinging, forgiveness-withholding sort of self-righteousness. “Hate has no home here” we like to tell ourselves. But the recourse to a little hate, the recourse to a little looking down at someone in the other political party, someone who doesn’t know things as well as we do, that worldly claim-ticket that entitles us to a little sneering at another in our inner monologue, yeah, that guy stays at this house sometimes. If I’m honest, that guy actually comes around way too often, kind of a clinger on, a total Debbie Downer, a real cosmic black hole that devours all things bright and beautiful. Knock knock. Yeah, he’s here. Just a minute, I’ll get him.

One of the best insights Socrates ever had, perhaps the most helpful confession he ever made on the road to wisdom was to acknowledge the limitations of his own knowledge and understanding. As he is being tried by the people of Athens, on his way to being put to death, Socrates states in the *Apology*, that he is smarter than his opponents in one regard, and that is that at least he knows that he knows nothing. Compared to most of the rest of us, he implies, who must first clear the way from all the falsehood they believe in, he has a head start in having overcome and discarded the illusion of knowing more than he actually does. Yoda, another great and more influential philosopher of our time tells his student, “you must unlearn what you have learned.” So Socrates, second to none in his wisdom says, even though I am only at step one and

know nothing, at least I am now on the right path in the long process of gaining wisdom. Wiser than most because he has already overcome the illusion of thinking he knows more than he does.

Giving thanks to God comes easy enough for most of us, even if we wished we did it more often and more thoroughly. What does not come so easy is acknowledging our utter and complete and unavoidable dependence upon God. Perhaps in most other times and places in humanity's existence acknowledging this simple fact comes easier to our sisters and brothers in our human family than it does to us. Perhaps knowing where the next glass of clean water will come from or the next meal or the relative confidence of personal safety with respect to war at our own doorstep makes it just too easy to pretend that our need of God's active presence in our lives is something less than utter and absolute. If salvation is simply and directly understood as deliverance from, and our 401k-NPR-experience of life as a satisfied-consumer is something more like what we imagine we'd like to be delivered to than from, well, this seems as good as any other reason why our churches are not overflowing in our time. The uncomfortable truth, one that previous generations were better equipped to acknowledge and confront (even if in doing so they often raised other problematic issues) is that we still need to be delivered from our comfort, we still stand in need of rescue even within the blessings of the wonderful and rich life for which we are grateful. We still need to be saved from ourselves. From that seduction of smallness in our interactions with one another. We still need to be saved from the God-denying delusion that what we can do it on our own, that what we have accomplished and what we have in the cupboard or driveway or in that handsome frame on the wall, that we earned that all on our own.

I think it is a confirmation of the diagnosis itself, that we can more readily recognize the wisdom of Socrates' confession of knowing nothing than the wisdom in our own confession of being nothing apart from God. Everything else, every other identity and sense of what we need and who we are and what we can do with this worldly gift of life, all that other stuff, our ancestors in the faith teach us, we must unlearn, we must sift through and discard, we must set aside if we want to get to the very beginning of this abundant life to which we are called in Christ. Our scripture reminds us that it is foolish to continue assessing the measure of our deliverance according to the external standards of the world rather than by what God makes available to us within our inner lives and among the quality of our life together. In the same way that those with power, as King and others have pointed out throughout history, will never voluntarily surrender that power to another group, so too is it with us human creatures and the power of the illusion that we can make it apart from God.

That is what this morning's lesson is about. Acknowledging our unavoidable poverty apart from God. Our inability to live in a way that is rooted and grounded in the love that God provides. Acknowledging, in a word confessing, that God does not make us strong to be strong in

ourselves, but to be strong with God and others in God's service. If philosophical wisdom begins in the acknowledgment of knowing that you know nothing, according to Ephesians, the wisdom of discipleship begins in knowing that apart from God, left to our own devices, without making a dwelling place, a home for Christ in our moment to moment living, this life fades away from us. And as Calvin instructs us, verse 17 "points out that part which is the true seat of Christ, our hearts, to show that it is not enough for Him to be on our tongues or flutter in our brains." (*New Testament Commentaries*, p.167) To flutter in our brains, to be spoken of on our tongues. That is not enough. We must make a dwelling place for Christ in our hearts. Acknowledging the need for this is not for the purpose of deepening our shame but so we can be delivered from it.

It is not enough to want hate to live somewhere else. We must choose to make a dwelling place for Christ in whose reliance we are given to love. This is what it means to give glory to God. To actively choose the love offered us in Christ and welcome Christ into our hearts.

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