

Inner Strength – Outer Power

3 – Ephesians – The Churchbook

Isaiah 61:1-4, 10-11

Ephesians 3:1-21

Luke 5:17-26

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Ordination-Installation Sunday

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An old legend tells how in the early days of the Church the Risen Jesus is seen on a road in Palestine, after the resurrection. A nameless person encounters him and asks what plans he has in mind for the future of his Church. Jesus answers, “Well I have spent three years with twelve men who became my disciples; fishermen, a tax collector, and I gave them my teachings. I shared my life with them. They saw my death. They saw my rising. They will take my message and pass it on to others.” “But,” asked the stranger, “suppose they fail. What back-up plans do you have?” Jesus said, “I have no other plans. I am counting on them.”

Our Lord Jesus looks upon South Highland Presbyterian Church today, two thousand years later and says, “I am counting on you.” His Church was born out of the original disciples’ witness. They saw him alive again. Some touched his wounds. The Holy Spirit descended upon them at Pentecost, filled them with power, and the Word went forth to all the lands. Now we have that same promise of his presence, that same assurance of his power, and that same reminder that he is still counting on us. He has no other plans. So trust him and relax, and let God use you. “He is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”

I

In the early 1990’s I went to Haiti. I was accompanying an eye doctor and team from the First Presbyterian Church, where I was serving, in Monroe, LA. Dr. Joe Humble performed hundreds of eye surgeries that week, primarily cataract removals, in the Presbyterian St. Croix Mission Hospital at Leogone, 30 miles west of Port au Prince. He was able to assist only a fraction of those needing help that week.

One morning I was picked up before sunrise by an amazing 7 foot tall Haitian Episcopal priest named Pere Albert who took me on a two hour ride in his jeep up into the mountains, traveling over little dirt roads and dry river beds, to the little village where his St. Matthias Church was located. Some of you will remember Pere Albert spoke at a mission luncheon here a few years ago. Before going to the mountains he had been the chaplain at St. Croix Presbyterian Hospital. Pere Albert was an extremely charismatic personality, filled with joy and an abundant faith in Jesus Christ. He had been sent to re-open the church, build schools, and start new churches in the mountains. I was to be guest preacher for the Wednesday morning communion service at St. Matthias.

As the service began, I looked out across the expectant, eager faces of over 300 impoverished Haitians who packed the old chapel and stood listening outside. When it

came to be time for communion, after he offered the Prayer, Pere Albert came over to me, handed me a little silver plate of bread and said, “You will serve the people.” I was surprised and honored not only to be included, but also to be invited to serve the sacrament. So according to their tradition, I stood at the front and, rather than placing bread in peoples’ hands, they opened their mouths and I placed the bread on their tongues. I had this overwhelming sense of how God reaches out his hands and feeds us.

It is a morning I have never forgotten, especially in the aftermath of the recent horrible earthquake. And herein is a parable. You see, Pere Albert had been sent to those mountains by the bishop as punishment. Not because he did anything wrong, but because he was as effective as a chaplain that the little administrator at St. Croix Hospital felt threatened by this wildly popular priest. So he got the bishop to send Pere Albert to the worst place in Haiti. But, up in those remote mountains, instead of withering away, Pere Albert flourished. God used him to transform the region. Churches grew. Schools were built, and filled with hundreds of little children. God was at work. He is able. He is still able and at work in Haiti, “to build up the ancient ruins, to repair the ruined cities.”

II

Ephesians is Paul’s most tightly-packed intense letter. It is a letter about the Church, thought by many scholars to be a circular letter to all those churches across Asia Minor that became the key launching points of the Gospel’s spreading throughout current-day Turkey, and Greece, Ephesus being the most significant church. Ephesians lifts up how the Church, with all its flaws and fickleness, is yet this amazing gift God has given. Paul mixes his metaphors and calls the Church - alternately, Christ’s Body, Christ’s Bride and Christ’s Building. You cannot read Ephesians and come out saying the Church is no big deal. Oh, the Church is alive, organic, growing, vibrant, and linked always to her head – Jesus Christ.

This third chapter overflows with expressions about how the mystery of God’s ways have been revealed, namely that Jews and Gentiles are now all united on equal footing in Jesus Christ. And Paul, formerly the persecutor of the Church, to his great astonishment, has been called to give a witness. As he says,

“This grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that **through the Church** the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known.”ⁱ

Made known through the Church, and not only to the neighborhood, not only to the Roman soldiers and Greek philosophers, but also made known “to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places.” This Church, you see, as the agent of Jesus Christ, is of vast dimensions, embracing the natural and the supernatural, time and eternity. God has given us this gift. He has no other plans for getting his Good News out than us.

Paul longs for the Ephesians to grasp the vision God has for his Church. He wants them to know it is a vision higher and deeper and wider and longer than even the

most creative story teller can imagine. But to grasp that vision will not be a matter of our effort and ingenuity, but of God's giving. God will give us all we need to see the vision and undertake it. Give it not only to the Church in Ephesus and the first century Churches in Asia Minor, but also give it to this Church, South Highland Presbyterian in the 21st Century in Birmingham. But in order for us to receive the fullness of God's vision for us we will need progressively to **be**, then to **see**, then to **do**.

III

If we would do the works of the people of God, we must first **be** the people of God. We cannot lead others where we have not gone ourselves. So if we want the Church and her effectiveness to grow, we must grow in our faith. And that takes time.

It takes significant focused time with God and each other. This is why the youth went away on retreat last weekend to Gatlinburg. This is why the officers went away on retreat this weekend to Samford University. This is why you have been praying for them over two weeks. This is why we commit to classes on Wednesday nights and early morning Bible studies. This is why we gather to experience our common life here - through worship as we lift praises to God, through education as we learn more about God, through fellowship as we build friendships and relationships one with another. As we undertake these things together, we become more and more connected to God and to one another. We begin to experience one another in the congregation, not as isolated amorphous individuals but rather as a true family of God.

But it all takes time. Paul raises a prayer for us of this progressive development. He prays that we may be strengthened in our inner being with power through Christ's spirit. He prays that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith as we are rooted and grounded in love. Thus rooted and grounded, we just may start to become the people God is shaping us to be. I like how John Mackay describes this development of our faith.

“From the human point of view, God's grace becomes effective through faith. Faith is openness towards God. Faith is opening one's whole being to the incoming of God as the Savior of Life; faith is the total response of the human spirit to the command of God as Lord of life. Faith is in the fullest sense an attitude of trust in God, an adventurous commitment to God himself.”ⁱⁱ

There is a type of pressurized chamber the Navy uses that is capable of being lowered by cables down to great depths thousands of feet beneath the surface to the ocean's floor. This chamber is able to withstand immense pressures upon it from the outside because of the strength of its construction, so people on the inside can function quite normally in an environment that would otherwise collapse their lungs and their whole bodies. Faith is like that. Christ comes to us as a strong inner counter-force to the pressures outside. As we open our inner beings to Christ, as we allow Christ access to those hidden places within and ask him to take up residence, he helps us, He gives us inner strength to withstand immense pressures outside.

IV

From such a place of **being**, Paul goes on to pray that we may **see**. “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints.” Faith comes, as a pair of eyeglasses, to help us see what we missed before. In this we are not alone, but we see together as part of the Church made up of fellow saints. Paul prays that together we may see and comprehend how immense is the reality all around us. “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.”ⁱⁱⁱ

South Highland could not function a single day as a one man band. We need the varied gifts and graces of all in the body together to be the Church on this corner in this time. Consider a typical week at South Highland. All the gifts that are brought together here in the form of teachers and cleaners and office workers, flower arrangers and singers and visitors and encouragers and counselors and care givers, to name just a few. In order for us to see the vast glorious Technicolor reality that is the Kingdom of God being lived out here among us, it takes all the body participating, offering their varied gifts.

Do you ever lie in bed at night and think about how big the universe is? How far away is the nearest star? How many more stars and universes may be beyond what we dimly know? It is more than our minds can comprehend. And so is the Church. Sometimes our expectations for the Church are just too small. You know – a place to match, hatch and dispatch. But think about our continuing for all these 20 centuries. Paul prays for us to see and comprehend this great vision of God’s desired future for the church, God’s preferred future, and have our minds and hearts stretched, “to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

V

This happens as we **are** together, being the people of God. This happens as we are looking to **see** together the immensity of God’s plan, difficult and confusing as it often is. Only then are we ready to rise to **do** together the work God is calling us to undertake. Here we come to the resolution Paul expresses in his benediction. Paul’s reasoning can be pretty convincing. But his logic is not airtight. Yes, a lot of mystery has been revealed, but still there is mystery. Still there is darkness and pain and suffering. So all Paul can do finally is sing a doxology, offer up praise. He confidently shouts, “**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!** Here is the resolution. Once we have our lives opened to and aligned with God’s intention for us, God is able to go to work through us to do amazing things beyond our wildest or imagining.

Like these fellows in Luke’s story where the four men bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus. Jesus is busy teaching in a crowded house, and the men cannot reach him. But so confident are they that Jesus is able to provide for their friend what he really needs, that they do the unthinkable, the unimaginable. They tear the roof right off that house where Jesus is, and lower the man on a blanket by ropes right down to Jesus’ feet. Love finds a way. Faith drives them to it. Hope brings healing to a paralyzed man, who

receives both forgiveness of his sins, then spring in his step, as he stands before them, walks, and causes all the crowd that day to sing their doxology, too. “They glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, ‘We have seen strange things today.’”

VI

How do you explain the tragedy of Haiti? Both the immediate earthquake and Haiti’s long, sad history? Pere Albert, my dear friend and guide up into the mountains that morning in Haiti, died a few years ago of pancreatic cancer. The Hospital in St. Croix where he had been chaplain was near the epicenter of the earthquake. It has been leveled, and many lives were lost. I have not heard about the St. Matthias Church in the mountains, although I have heard that some of the mission schools were damaged. Through it all, I have been moved by the faith of the Haitians. We have seen images of them singing and praying in the face of vast devastation, asking God to hold them together and get them through this. A prayer we all join with our lips and our gifts, believing with Isaiah, “They shall build up the ancient ruins. They shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.”^{iv}

Faith does not protect us from earthquakes and cancer and any number of human tragedies. “For your Father in heaven makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous,”^v “There will be famines and earthquakes in various places,”^{vi} Jesus said. But faith shows us a way through. Faith enables us to endure, no matter what, because we have built our lives, and built our Church, on the rock.

Today a group of new elders, deacons and trustee are making their promises. They are taking up their mantles of responsibilities for which they have prayed and prepared, and studied and shared, since last September. And we have seen some awesome, some amazing expressions of faith through each of them, and will. Individually each will do his or her significant part, that together we might do a miraculous work. God has great work for us to do. And God will enable us to do it. For God has no back-up plans. He is counting on us. And he is able. Are you ready?

“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.”^{vii}

ⁱ Ephesians 3:9-10

ⁱⁱ John MacKay, God’s Order, p.117

ⁱⁱⁱ Ephesians 3:18-19

^{iv} Isaiah 61:4

^v Matthew 5:45

^{vi} Matthew 24:7

^{vii} Ephesians 3:20-21