

“Practicing Resurrection: Rooted and Grounded in Love”  
 (3<sup>rd</sup> of 4 in series on Ephesians)  
 Delivered Sunday, May 15, 2011  
 By Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor  
 Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC

Ephesians 3:14-21

I walk a lot in this Shandon neighborhood where I both work and live – several mornings a week with a friend, and as many evenings as possible with Larry and the family dog, Boo. One of things I have noticed recently is how many old trees are having to come down because of age, or disease, or because their root systems are pushing up anything in their way – mostly the sidewalks. When the old trees are cut down, in that city-owned space between sidewalk and street, new ones are planted with a fairly sophisticated root protection system that allows for the tree to take hold and thrive. As you walk by and notice the above ground evidence of strong old roots making the sidewalks buckle, or the obvious care to give trees their best chance, you can only imagine the underground network of roots reaching down and out to give a tree its firm footing.

To live and to thrive – we too have to have roots. I have met very few people who have come to faith out of thin air. The promises we make at baptism to our very young is a matter of nurturing their foundation of faith, of making claims for our children that they live into before they understand God’s promises themselves. Those of you who were here this past Wednesday night for the children’s end-of-the-year music program saw how – sixty children strong – our choirs led by Anne and Bill McNair are sinking deep roots in faith. Shandon’s children and youth choirs are not just learning how to read music, or sing Bible stories – although they are that. But they are also being steeped in the best of Reformed theology, learning the language of faith as an experience of God’s love and grace. After this past Wednesday’s program, I am convinced we have 5-year-olds – 8-year-olds – 13-year-olds in our church who can define the densely theological word *covenant* as well as many adults. This kind of ministry among our children and youth is about roots.

French philosopher and Christian, Simone Weil, said:” To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul ...Up-rootedness is by far the most dangerous malady to which human societies are exposed ...To be rooted ... to have a strong and dependable system that provides nourishment; to be grounded, sure of who you are, and what your life is about: this is indeed one of the most important needs of the human soul.” (1)

Over the last couple of weeks we have considered how the early Christians at Ephesus, converts and newcomers to faith in God, responded to the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. The letter is nurturing a newly planted church. As Gentiles – once they were strangers to the promises of God. Now, because of Jesus’ resurrection, they have been called: “blessed, chosen, destined, bestowed, lavished, and gathered up as God’s own.” Once, as non-Jews, these Ephesians were considered

complete outsiders to the faith; now, by the power of the resurrection, they are united as one body – with all Christians in and for the world. Following these affirmations, today our reading comes from the center and heart of the letter, in the form of a prayer for this early church:” I pray...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love... I pray that you may know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

With their – and our – calling into the body of the church comes responsibility. The love of God that welcomed them into the fold also commissions them to love! The stories that were circulating among the early church about Jesus – were stories of his open and generous heart. Jesus embodied the love of God. He agonized with the suffering of a paralyzed man, a stooped woman, a young adult born blind. His heart ached over the moral bondage of man so tied to his material possessions he could not see or serve the poor. He forgave a woman caught in the act of adultery, because he longed to set her free. Jesus’ love persisted in spite of his friends’ blunders and betrayals. His love endured despite being pinned to a cross between thieves. As theologian Anthony Padovano has said, “We are saved not by the physical death of Jesus, but by the absoluteness of a love which did not count death too high a price.” (3)

Therefore those of us who engage in his resurrected life, who *practice resurrection*, are called to be so rooted and grounded in his love that we reach out in his kind of generous love to others. We become for one another part of what Jesus is for us: one who heals, nourishes, strengthens, forgives and challenges.

This notion that love is at the core of the Christian religion was an essential message for the early church at Ephesus. They were not only new to a covenant relationship with God – long enjoyed by their Jewish-Christian counterparts, who had been steeped in a tradition, and observed a law of faith that required loving God and neighbor, and welcoming the stranger. Coming to faith from outside this Jewish tradition, the Ephesians also came to Christianity amid Greek and Roman understandings of what was divine. For ancient Greeks and Romans, it was intelligence rather than love which provided the major clue for the nature of the Divine Reality. And, according to Plato and his followers, God could also be named The Good, in the sense of some other worldly perfection. But to identify God as Love was, in large measure, a new Christian understanding.

That is how these early Christians came to experience the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This power of the living God, in their midst, called them together, helped them find a sense of unity despite their variety and differences, and sent them into their community with the work of Jesus himself to do. The resurrection was – above all – an experience of God’s love. This is why the ancient history books said of those early Christians – “See how they love one another!” And if that early church had any chance of taking root for the long haul, amid severe persecutions, it was love – binding them together as a family in faith, and reaching out in every direction: love for fellow Christians in all their complex diversity, love for the widow and orphan, the poor in the land, love for strangers and aliens who came into their territory as

foreigners, love for Jesus Christ made manifest in loving every kind of person he himself had loved, touched, healed, and forgiven.

Charles Spurgeon, that wonderful British Baptist preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, earned the name “Prince of Preachers” because he preached ten times a week and during his lifetime to more people than any other. He had a wonderful way with words, and in one of his sermons preached in London in the late 1800’s, he described how a tree reflects the life of faith.” I was sitting, one day in the New Forest, under a beech tree,” he wrote.” I like to look at the beech, and study it, as I do many other trees, for every one has its own peculiarities and habits, its special ways of twisting its boughs, and growing its bark, and opening its leaves, and so forth ... As I looked up at that beech, and admired the wisdom of God in making it, I saw a squirrel running round and round the trunk, and up the branches, and I thought to myself, ‘Ah! This beech tree is a great deal more to you than it is to me, for it is your home, your living, your all.’ Its big branches were the main streets of his city, and its little boughs were the lanes; somewhere in that tree he had his house, and the beech-mast was his daily food, he lived on it.”

And then Spurgeon made the connection to faith: “Well, now, the way to deal with God’s love is not merely to contemplate it, or to study it, as a student does; but to live on it, as that squirrel lives on his beech tree. Let God’s love be to you, spiritually, your house, your home, your food, your medicine, your clothing, the one essential element of your soul’s life and growth.” (4)

What a wonderful way to practice resurrection! May Christ so dwell in our hearts through faith, that we may be rooted and grounded in love.

AMEN.

#### NOTES

1) Simone Weil quote from Cynthia Campbell’s sermon, “Rooted and Grounded,” Fourth Presbyterian, Chicago, 7/27/03.

2) Joan Delaplane, “That Two Lettered Word” *The Living Pulpit: Love*, July-Sept., 1992, p. 13.

3) David Tracy, “God is Love: The Central Christian Metaphor,” *The Living Pulpit: Love*, July-Sept., 1992, p. 10.

4) Spurgeon quote from *The Westminster Collection of Christian Meditations*, compiled by Jannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, p. 248.