

STRENGTHEN YOUR INNER BEING

(09/24/17)

Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 3:1-21

“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.”

This morning we are continuing to explore Paul’s *Letter to the Ephesians* as a Sunday morning Bible study.

Some biblical scholars have raised questions about the authenticity of this letter, not in regard to its significance but with regard to the assertion that it was written by the apostle Paul. Because the literary structure or style does not match that of some of Paul’s known letters, some scholars believe someone who accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys wrote it on Paul’s behalf. The author was probably not trying to be deceitful by claiming that Paul wrote this epistle because he believed that this is what Paul did or might have said.

Other biblical scholars disagree. They believe Paul wrote the letter while he was imprisoned in Rome. They believe the differences in literary style are not great enough to warrant the assumption of a different author.

I am not a biblical scholar. I have never studied New Testament Greek and I am not competent to make a judgment on this matter. I also don’t care who wrote it. Let me explain why it makes no difference to me whether it was Paul or a fellow missionary.

When I read scripture, I am not interested in whether something actually happened as described. I am not interested in determining who wrote a particular passage and to whom it was addressed. I am interested in whether the passage is true on a psychological and spiritual level. I am interested in the implications of the passage for my faith, for the deepening of my relationship with God through Christ. If it doesn’t do this for me or for my parishioners as we struggle with what has been called “the eternal recurrent problems of human existence,” I am not particularly interested in it.

I don’t particularly care who wrote this letter because the teaching contained in it strikes me as profoundly true. When I say it resonates as true, I mean that I find it

consistent with the teachings of Jesus and that it is true of life, that it gives us guidelines for living a healthy and fulfilling life. I am less interested in an analysis of the literary style of this letter than I am of its meaning, the meaningfulness of its teaching.

I like the approach to authority that was articulated by the Buddha 2,500 years ago. The Buddha said, “Don’t believe something just because your teacher tells you it is true. Don’t believe something just because it is written in sacred scripture. Don’t even believe something because I, the Buddha, tell you it is true. Try it on. Try it out in your own life. If it strikes you as true or helpful, hold it fast. If it doesn’t, let it go.”

Let’s apply this criterion to Jesus’ teachings. For example, Jesus told Peter that he should forgive those who offend him not seven times but seventy times seven. Don’t believe this just because Jesus said it or because it is written in the Bible. Try it out.

First try forgiving someone who has hurt you. Try to understand him/her and realize how often what people say and do is unconsciously motivated. Try to realize how often the hurtful interactions between people arise out of ignorance, weakness, or fear. Try to actually have compassion for the person who has hurt you. See how this feels.

Then try holding onto the grudge. Tell the story of how the person hurt you over and over again to yourself and to anyone who will listen so that you can keep the feelings of hurt and righteous indignation alive. Nurture your resentment and let it smolder deep within you. Harbor fantasies of revenge. Keep your hatred close to your heart. See how this feels.

Try it both ways. Then take the one that feels better. Take the one that leads you into a more beautiful, loving, and compassionate experience of life. Take the option that is most consistent with the heart and the mind of Jesus, and let the other one go. If you really try them both, I’m not particularly worried about which option you will choose.

The same is true of prayer, meditation and worship. Don’t pray, meditate or attend Sunday worship because you feel you should. Don’t pray, meditate or attend Sunday worship just because I, your pastor, encourage you to engage in these spiritual practices and lay a guilt trip on you when you don’t. Try them. See if they bring you closer to God, to other people, and to the deepest parts of yourself. If these spiritual disciplines don’t help you to deepen your relationship with God, let them go. It would be stupid to pray, meditate, or come to worship if it were of no benefit to you.

By the way, if you really try them I'm not particularly worried about whether you will continue them or not.

In the third chapter, as we heard this morning, Paul writes to his parishioners about what he calls "the mystery of Christ." I suspect that "the mystery of Christ" is the resurrection. Remember, Paul never met the historical Jesus of Nazareth. He encountered, or, more correctly, *was encountered by* the risen Christ while he was traveling on the road to Damascus. This was when Paul realized that Christ had risen from the dead, that Christ was alive in the world and also in him. This was the experience, the realization or epiphany that totally changed Paul's life.

You see, Paul did not preach the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ because he felt this was his duty. His theology, his beliefs did not come to him as a result of deductive reasoning. Paul's ministry rose out of an intense personal experience that transformed his life. In his letters he often recalls the kind of person he was before he met Christ, when he was an enemy of Christ and actively persecuted Christ's followers. The experience on the road to Damascus totally changed his life. He liked the person he now was. This is why he could preach with such conviction, why he could preach with such joy.

Paul goes on to say that he wants to help everyone, both Jew and Gentile, "see" what is the plan of the mystery hidden in God. This goes back to the verse in Chapter 1 where Paul expresses the hope that "the eyes of our heart might be enlightened." I love that phrase! Paul wants us to see God through enlightened eyes, through vision that has been shaped by the teachings of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Paul is telling us that we have access to God *in or through* Christ Jesus.

By the way, don't believe this just because Paul said it or because it is written in the Bible. Try it out in your own life. See if *being in* Christ Jesus helps you to see others more clearly. See if being in Christ Jesus helps you to respond to others more lovingly. See if being in Christ Jesus brings you closer to God. See if being in Christ Jesus helps us to "tear down the walls that divide us from each other."

Paul closes with a prayer for his parishioners and us. He says,

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.

Paul prays that we may be “strengthened in our inner being.” This is the gift that comes to us if we live our lives as disciples of the Way. When we discover the Holy Spirit, the presence of the risen Christ within us, this presence strengthens the core of our inner being. It pulls us back to our true center. This gives us not only the courage and the strength to deal with life but also the wisdom to live our life as God would have us live it, to not only rise above the anxieties and fears that beset us, but to bring a loving, caring, compassionate Christian spirit to everything we do.

When, as Paul says, we are “strengthened in our inner being” through our discovery of the Christ who dwells within us; when, as Paul says, “Christ dwells in our hearts through faith;” then, Paul says, our lives will be “rooted and grounded in love.” Then we will know “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” and we will be “filled with the fullness of God.” This is an absolutely beautiful passage!

And it’s true! Don’t take my word for it. Try it out! Discover or rediscover the Spirit of Christ within you. Place yourself “in” Christ Jesus by taking on his heart and mind and then see how this shapes the way you see your brothers and sisters. See if it leads you to see them “with the eyes of your heart enlightened.” Let Christ dwell within your heart, and see whether you will find yourself “filled with all the fullness of God.”

Maybe it won’t work for you. If it doesn’t, then I would advise you to do something different on Sunday mornings. Perhaps you could stay home and read the paper or catch up on the latest examples of insanity in our government, in our nation, and in governments and nations around the world.

By the way, if you really open yourself to the potentially transforming experience of worship, I’m not particularly worried about what you will be doing this time next Sunday!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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September 24, 2017*