

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

July 25, 2021
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Ephesians 3:14-21

A Pastor's Prayer

You probably know that people can say—how should I say this—silly things to pastors. Such as, “With your connections, could you say a prayer for good weather this afternoon?” As if the prayers of “professional Christians” have more clout with God than the prayers of others!

Such a simplistic understanding of prayer, which is more common than we'd like to admit, is part of the reason I love these verses from Ephesians. They model for us the real prayers of pastors, the sort of prayer pastors really are responsible for. The best prayers of pastors are not to gain advantage from the Master of the Universe, nor to claim control over parishioners' lives. Rather, they are expressions of faith and hope in God and of love for the people of God.

The Rev. Percy Ainsworth was an Anglican priest more than 100 years ago whose sermons and writings still inspire. In a meditation on prayer, he summarized, “The end of prayer is not to win concessions from Almighty Power, but to have communion with Almighty Love.” (“Petition and Communion,” *Weavings*, July/Aug 2007, p. 36)

Praying for the people is among the most important responsibilities of any congregational leader. In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), all deacons, elders, and ministers of Word and sacrament pledge “I will” in our ordination vows in response to the question: *Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?* Some of those prayers are indeed requests of God. God wants us to express our needs. But the prayer of Ephesians 3, beginning with verse 14, is deeper and broader. If it is a request, it is also a commitment. Help this people to live as Christ's people. May they be rooted and grounded in your eternal love, O God.

This is the real prayer of a pastor for the people under his or her care: to have Christ flowing through their veins. In this summer of drought, anyone who tends a garden knows how plants crave water. When I returned from vacation last week, it was easy to see what sort of weather my yard had experienced in the previous six days. Our teenaged house sitter had followed my instructions, but I hadn't foreseen just how hot and dry it would be. Plants which can usually survive without attention had wilted to the ground. It took a few days of watering those garden beds to restore evidence of life.

And as I watered, I thought of these verses, hoping that the roots were deep enough, that the suffering plants were sufficiently grounded to recover from deprivation.

I pray that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

Though my words were never so eloquent, throughout these many months of pandemic, this has been my prayer for this congregation—that our roots would be deep enough in the soil of faith to keep the congregation alive despite stressful conditions. That the water of life, God's Holy Spirit, would be sufficient because those roots would keep reaching deeper, keep finding whatever moisture was available, keep trusting because God's grace has always proven sufficient in the past. And I prayed that the inner power of knowing Christ would course through this body, and this garden of God would once again thrive not because of our own power or riches or ambition, but because of the love of Christ that dwells in our hearts.

I believe in the future of this church because I have seen its strength through these difficult times. This congregation is rooted and grounded in love. I see that in the networks of care which have reached out,

seeking to identify those struggling emotionally or spiritually through the pandemic. The outreach isn't perfect—I know there are folks still struggling, still hurt, still lonely—but I also know that there is a great deal of mutuality in the caring. It is never one-way, always back-and-forth. The interconnected roots in a forest or a garden tell the true story of community—there are no independent individuals. We are “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,” Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” (Letter from a Birmingham Jail) The soil in which this congregation is planted is rich in Christ's love, which nourishes the community of faith.

But it is not just these last stress-filled months which reveal the grounding in love present here. As I reflect on the time Dan and I have been in ministry with you, I am still in awe of the way we navigated together the challenging path through our society's changing understandings of human sexuality and gender identity. This is a traditional body of believers, a community which values stability and honors the wisdom of tradition. In that sense, this is a conservative church. Yet it is also a community which pays attention to what's going on in the world and in the lives of individuals and families—in that sense, it is a progressive church. Wrestling with scripture and new understandings of how humans are made--which is, in our understanding, in the image of God--this church was able to grow beyond tradition to quietly embrace a new way: the full welcome and inclusion of those precious and beloved children of God who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or whatever letter of the alphabet is left to be claimed! And that was not because we all agreed about, or understood, human sexuality as it is experienced and expressed in today's world. No, those decisions for full inclusion were made because we acknowledged love as our #1 calling, our top priority, more important than standing on right belief. When I think about that process, I am so proud to have walked that road with you, learning and living God's love together.

Rooted and grounded in love. The evidence of that is all over this congregation's story. So let me talk about how I see that in our Rockhaven ministry. 24½ years ago, when we arrived here to serve as co-pastors, we heard about the mixed feelings of the congregation toward its little camp on the Gallatin. Some loved it dearly; some thought of it as a bottomless money pit which should be sold to the highest bidder. Obviously, those who loved it prevailed. Those who loved Rockhaven saw it as a source of spiritual nourishment, a gift to share with others, a place where people could be rooted and grounded in the knowledge and love of God. With a great deal of faith and courage, this congregation has stepped out to grow the ministry at Rockhaven into an exceptional gift to our larger community. When I hear the prayer of Ephesians, the hope of the apostle that his people would have *“the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, and to be filled with the fullness of God,”* I see children playing under the shadow of Sheep Rock, exploring the flowing waters of the creek, and discovering themselves in a nurturing Christian community. I see elders enjoying the peacefulness of a beloved place where God has been revealed to them for many years. I see a community learning to value God's creation and our part in it. I see people being rooted and grounded in love.

But the pastor's prayer must always look forward. What will the next chapters of this congregation's life hold? Built on the foundation of what has come before, rooted and grounded in love, the church's calling ever and always is to live as Christ in the world. And while it is important to be grounded in the world's struggles, it is essential to keep our sights on the eternal promise of Jesus Christ. That is the way Christ lived. Again, Percy Ainsworth lifts our eyes to this heavenly dimension of our calling, writing,

When people speak of Jesus of Nazareth as having been at home in the world . . .
 . they are only playing on the surface of all that Christ was and did. He was gracious,

patient, self-sacrificing, accessible in the world, but he was at home in the heavenly places. He used words that were familiar and simple, and spoke of things people saw around them, but His words always took people beyond the thought of house and field, bread and home, neighbour and kin. People felt that He saw something they did not see, and that His deepest care for them often began just where their care for themselves ended. He spoke their language and seemed to tread their path; but they saw that no one ever spoke as He spoke, and the best among them knew that he came from God and went to God.

(“The Pilgrim Church,” *Weavings*, July/August 2005, pp. 11-12)

The church’s calling, now and into the future, is to represent to the world something no other human organization can provide, the imagination of God. To let God’s power be at work in us, to “accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” And in doing so, to glorify God and enjoy God eternally, to all generations, forever and ever.

My friends, beloved of God, as you pray for the future of this church, do so with faith that the One who called this church into being is faithful, and will provide. Do so with hope for God’s purposes to be fulfilled in this garden of God’s planting. And do so with love for God, for one another and for the world, for that is the lifeblood on which Christ’s church depends.

May First Presbyterian Church always be rooted and grounded in God’s love.