

January 29-30, 2011

Title: Loved

Theme: *“Hurting people hurt people”. So often our inability to love others well stems from the reality that we, ourselves, don’t feel loved. God’s radical love in Jesus is the embrace our heart longs for and the foundation for our loving others well.*

Texts: Psalm 103: 8-17; Ephesians 3: 14-19

Notes on the Texts

Psalm 103:8-17

This is a psalm of thanksgiving focusing primarily on the mercy and forgiveness of God. The passage focuses on God’s justice. While God takes sin seriously and disciplines sinners, the purpose is not primarily to be punitive but to restore relationship. God does get angry with sinners, but God’s anger is fleeting. God chooses to forgive, chooses to not remember our sins, chooses to give us what we need rather than what we deserve. And why? According to the Psalmist it is because of God’s nature, God’s steadfast love and mercy. While we are undeserving...mere mortals whose lives are fleeting...God’s love endures forever. There is also quite a bit of covenant language behind this Psalm, reinforcing the dynamic of God’s choice. Particularly relevant to our topic this week would be these two themes:

- Forgiveness is a proactive gesture of love and mercy. God doesn’t forgive because we’ve confessed or even asked for forgiveness. God initiates forgiveness just as God initiates love (we love because he first loved us).
- Forgiveness focuses on the restoration of relationship. This is God’s restorative justice.

Ephesians 3:14-19

This beautiful prayer of Paul for the Ephesians begins with the words “For this reason.” Oddly enough, so does the entire chapter. Paul has a history of starting a thought, digressing, and then seeking to return to the original thought. This pattern makes sense when we remember that Paul dictated these letters. So, to what is Paul referring...what reason? He is referring to 2:11-22 where he celebrates the union of Jews and Gentiles in Christ. Overwhelmed by the blessings given to Jews and Gentiles and the privilege of sharing this newly revealed "mystery," Paul exclaimed, “I bow my knees before the Father.” While it was common among Jews to stand in prayer, kneeling revealed the earnestness and humble submission that Paul felt as he spoke these words.

Paul first prays that the Ephesians would be “strengthened in [their] inner being.” Strength here is the opposite of discouraged. This strength or courage will come from the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Paul desired that the Ephesians would have courage to the depth of their being...but courage for what? Ultimately for the challenge of being disciples in a world that does not value what God values. Living God’s agenda in this world is challenging and requires courage.

Next Paul prays that Christ may dwell in the hearts of these believers. The word for “dwell” here conveys a sense of settling in permanently. Not only would Christ’s presence add to their courage, but his presence would also bring transformation, especially to their hearts – the seat of both emotion and will in Greek culture. When Christ dwells in their hearts they will be shaped into his likeness.

In Greek verse 17 connects to verse 18. Paul prays that the Ephesians might be “rooted and grounded”, that is firmly established, in love...referring to God’s love. Paul prayed that this foundation of love would empower believers to comprehend (to reach out and grasp, apprehend), along with all believers (because none of us gets the whole picture) the sheer magnitude (breadth, length, height and depth) of God’s love in Christ. And not only that Paul wants these believers to know (experience) this love because it surpasses knowledge (exceeds our capacity to intellectually grasp it). So, when it comes to God’s love there is both knowing and experiencing.

And for what purpose does Paul want these disciples to know and experience this love? So that they “may be filled with all the fullness of God.” This “fullness” means that there is nothing lacking in our relationship to with God. God pours God’s love and power into believers, making us complete for all that God calls us to do...primarily to love others.

Paul closes this prayer with a doxology, praising God who is at work within us, doing far more than we could ever imagine or ask by God’s incredible power.

Preaching Possibilities

In her book entitled People-Making author and psychotherapist Virginia Satir talks about a pot that sat on the porch of the house in which she grew up. The pot was used for all sorts of purposes. Sometimes the pot was full with things like flowers. At other times the pot was empty. Satir said that people are like that pot. Sometimes we are full of self-worth, knowing ourselves to be loved, valued and competent. On those days we tend to be creative and relate to people well. We let little things roll off our backs easily and let go of small slights. At other times, however, we are empty. Our sense of self-worth is gone. We feel unloved, undervalued and incompetent. On those days we tend to feel stuck, unable to get outside of ourselves. We also tend to strike out at others, unable to relate in healthy, helpful ways, often interpreting people’s words or actions in the most uncharitable ways.

Our doing always flows out of our being. That’s another way of saying that our identity (our experiences and the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves) deeply inform how we treat others. Knowing ourselves to be deeply, unconditionally loved by God fills us up so that our lives overflow with love for others. Knowing ourselves to be deeply, unconditionally forgiven by grace we are

set free to forgive others. Having been so richly fed by God's abundance we will have just gotten done feeding children through FMSC. Perhaps that is why Paul is so intent upon the Ephesians knowing and experiencing the depth of God's love for them. How could Jews and Gentiles love one another if they were not anchored in God's love for them?

And so, as we begin this new series on relational health, restoring broken relationships, reaching out to others with love and forgiveness we can't get to the law (what we're called to DO) until we've dealt with the Gospel (what God has done). Since this sermon "tees up" the series we'll need to accomplish a few things:

- Introduce the topic of relational health
- Explore what that has to do with the "Forgive us this day" petition...ultimately about restoring relationships.
- Discover how the Good News of God's love for each of us impacts and empowers us to restore relationships in our own lives. This will be a great opportunity to simply proclaim the Gospel of God's love.

This is also a great reminder of the power we have to shape the story that others tell themselves about themselves (another way of saying what the bible means when it talk about edifying or building one another up...Walt Wangerin has a great story about this entitled "Edification/Demolition").

I have a copy of the following video...which you can view on YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spr9aCNdRbU>

It fits the theme very well, if we'd like to use it. The song that accompanies it, Michael W. Smith's "Never Been Unloved" would be a great song to consider.