

July 28th, 2024

Ephesians 3:14-21 “In Response to Love”

Here’s an old saying that you don’t hear much anymore. “Make yourself at home.” It’s one of those “old-timey” greetings that folks used to say to guests who were visiting their homes. The visitor rings the doorbell, and the host answers the door. Maybe it’s a guest they were expecting, or maybe it’s one who just happened to be in the neighborhood and drops by, or maybe it’s a first-time guest. It doesn’t matter much. The host greets the guest, invites them in and says, “Make yourself at home.” I want you to think about that for a second. That’s a heck of a thing to say to a person visiting your living space, isn’t it? “Make yourself at home.” Okay. What if the guest says, “Why thank you,” then walks in the door, takes off their shoes, strolls into the kitchen, opens the refrigerator, makes a snack, moseys on into the living room where they plop down on the couch, and turns on the TV to watch what ... *Ted Lasso? Game of Thrones? Beverly Hillbillies?* Who knows. Maybe that’s why people don’t use that greeting anymore! Could you imagine if that happened to you? Sure, maybe if it was close family, but still! Makes you want to stop and think about what you’re going to say before you say it.

Early on in my faith journey, I was told that when we decide to follow Jesus, we invite him to live in our hearts. In fact, one church I attended had a song that was often played when the pastor gave the invitation for anyone who wanted to become a Christian. It was called, *Make My Heart Your Home*. The chorus was,

Make my heart Your home
Take it as Your own
Light the fire and warm this house
With perfect peace
Love is overdue
So I welcome You
Come inside and make my heart Your home

The pastor of that church would often explain that inviting Jesus into our hearts was more than just inviting him in for a visit. He'd say, "Think about what you do when you know you're going to have a visitor. Especially if it's an important guest. You clean your house. You get it ready. You make a mental checklist. You know that the guest is going to be in the living room, or "the sitting room" as they call it in the south. So you do your best to clean it, but there's an exercise bike in the middle of the living room that you or someone dragged out of another room so that you could pedal while binge-watching *Bridgerton*. You know you can't have the bike in the sitting room when Jesus comes over. You don't want him to stub his toe on it. Of course, I'm speaking hypothetically here. So you put the bike in the "other room." Does anyone have an "other room?" That's the room where things just get piled up when you can't find a place for them. Then you think, "Uh-oh, we're going to have dinner, so I'd better clean the dining room too." Except you've been using the dining room table to work on a project that requires all sorts of gadgets and tools. So you gather all that stuff up. You don't have time to put it all back where it belongs, so you put it in that "other room" with the exercise bike. Then it occurs to you that it's likely your guest will need to use the bathroom at some point during their visit. So you walk into the bathroom and there's all this drip-dry-only laundry hanging up on the shower curtain rod and the towel racks. So you grab them and put it all in the "other room."

Now this is where the pastor of that church typically ramped up the stakes in this illustration. He talks about how the host goes through all the other rooms in the house that the guest might visit, but there's a variety of things in those rooms that are either in the way or that may even be embarrassing. So you keep putting all these things in the "other room" until you have to lean on the door to get it to shut because the room is so full of things that you don't want your guest to see. Then the doorbell rings. You open the door, and there's Jesus. You say, "Come on in and make yourself at home." But Jesus is the kind of guest that takes you literally. And in this illustration, Jesus goes to each one of the rooms in your house and, according to this pastor, makes little comments that

oddly sound more like issues the pastor has rather than Jesus. Like, “Oh, I notice you’ve got the whole *Harry Potter* collection in your video library. Hmmm. Interesting.” Then he goes to the kitchen, opens up the fridge and says, “Wow. You must do a lot of cooking with beer.” He goes to your bathroom, “You know, it’s better to use a natural loofa sponge than one made out of synthetic materials.” See, this was a church who believed in “Judgy Jesus.” Then Judgy Jesus goes into your garage and says, “Consumer reports rate Milwaukee tools higher than DeWalt. You might want to think about that the next time you go to Lowe’s.” Or I guess I should say Home Depot since this is Judgy Jesus we’re talking about. And as you might guess, Jesus saves the “other room” for last. Of course, you don’t want Jesus to see everything you’ve crammed into that room. You already messed up by forgetting to put the *Harry Potter* collection and your beer in there. So you say, “No, Jesus. You don’t want to go in that room.” But Jesus says, “I do. Remember, you said, ‘make yourself at home. You’ve got to show me everything.’” So you open the “other room” door and everything comes crashing down and spills out into the rest of the house. And in an act of contrition you say, “Jesus, I’m sorry that I tried to hide all these things from you, and now here’s this big mess.” And of course, Jesus says, “Then let’s work together to clean this mess up.” Jesus is no longer a visitor, he now lives in your heart.

Are there problems with this illustration? Yes. Again, Jesus sounds much more like the pastor than the Jesus who’s portrayed in the Bible. But you know what? It’s not a bad illustration once you sift through the borderline creepy manipulative parts. And it goes along with what we’ve been talking about in Ephesians when it comes to becoming a family or “a household of God.” The section Gary read is a prayer that Paul offers within the text of his letter. His prayer is an acknowledgement that it’s really hard to grasp the extent of God’s love. It’s hard to define. It’s hard to put into words. But he says that on the journey toward figuring it out, we will be strengthened by God’s spirit to receive inner strength, and that Christ will make his home in our hearts. This prayer is about people coming to terms with themselves and discovering God’s resources. It’s about a church coming to an understanding of who they are and finding

God in their midst. It's not a prayer about vision statements or mission statements or goals and strategies. It is not about being a "purpose driven church" nor is it about adopting a particular model of church growth. And I'm not saying that those tools aren't useful in ministry, but they aren't always very helpful when it comes to showing people how to discover or rediscover God. When we use these church-growth tools and strategies, we're usually hoping that the *institution* will be strengthened. But when we focus on discovering God first, our *inner selves* will be strengthened. Yes, there is a time and place for these church growth tools, but when that becomes our focus, it breeds defensiveness, comparisons, game playing, avoidance, blaming, fear and it has a snowball effect on others. It creates a blurring of boundaries that often gets those in positions of power into trouble.

Paul uses the phrase "inner being" in verse 16 which may cause some people to say, "That sounds kind of new age-y!" And I get that. The inner work that Paul is talking about here in Ephesians involves healthy self-reflection and healthy self-esteem and it enables us to appreciate others without fear. It creates space for others to be themselves and to know how to express their gifts. And to be honest, healthy self-esteem has a snowball effect too. The more we understand about the love God has for us, the more strength we'll sense in our inner being. And the better we feel about who we are, the more we're able to catch a glimpse of the extent of God's love for us. Some might say, "What are you talking about pastor? We're not supposed to feel good about ourselves! That's not the way of the church! We're supposed to feel ashamed of our sin!" Not according to this letter to the Ephesians!

Paul's prayer for his friends in Ephesus is that they will be given the ability to be *strong* in their inner being. Christian faith is concerned with strengthening, growing, freeing and getting in touch with our inner world. It's easy to get caught up in being active and busy in the church, but if these things happen at the expense of what is meant to happen *within* us, we're robbing the very center of our spiritual life. If we are to grow strong within, we must take the time to look inside, become

acquainted with ourselves and our feelings and then value that person we find. And this takes prayer. Prayer is something we Disciples like to talk about, but we need to do more than just talk about it. We need to take time to enter our inner world and listen to the still, small voice of God which then strengthens and fortifies us as individuals and as the church. Listening to this voice can bring a word of grace, not of demand. God is delighted when we listen and learn. God doesn't require us to be out there running around trying to earn points. God graciously accepts us wherever we are and loves us as we are. But for some reason we find this difficult to accept or believe. We are, in fact, created in the image of God. That image has been placed in every human being. God doesn't make junk and God's love knows no bounds. We can be angry with God and God will not reject us. If you don't believe me, read the book of Jonah. We can be lazy and God will not reject us. Read Matthew 26 and Mark 14 where Jesus' disciples choose to take a nap instead of praying with him like he asked. God still loved them. Yes, we get lost sometimes, but God will not give up on us. God offers words of freedom not bondage. God calls us to growth, not stagnation. God offers reconciliation instead of alienation.

During the early years of my faith journey and even in the early years of my ministry, I had this false notion that the Christian life was all about starving, denying, and imprisoning the inner world. I was led to believe that we were supposed to suppress our feelings without acknowledging them. I thought I was supposed to feel guilty if I felt too good about something. Because of this, I was tempted to pass this guilt on to others when they didn't see it my way or do it my way. Why should I be miserable alone, right? What I was missing was grace. This is why I share preacher secrets with you! Faith without grace is pointless. This is something I had to learn because every new day contains evidence that God's love is bigger than my ability to comprehend. I had to look for it and be willing to receive it.

Paul's prayer in our text for today is to grant the church in Ephesus and the church throughout history the power to be strong in our inner selves

as we learn to be grounded in love. It's okay to do this! A fortified inner self not only enables a person to *offer* love properly but also to *receive* love properly -without strings or reservation or suspicion. In that way we can invite Christ into our heart without the awkwardness of feeling like we have to run around and scramble to prepare our hearts ahead of time. We invite Christ in knowing that he will help us get our "houses" in order so that we can know the fullness of God.