

ROOTS: LOVE-FUELED ACTIVITY
March 27, 2016

SERMON TEXT:

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Eph 3:14–21)

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Introduction

Picture your life as a *tree*. The Bible does, so let’s do it: picture your life as a tree. Above ground, what do you want? Well, you want *security*. You don’t want to be a tree that topples the first time a storm rolls in. Nobody wants to be the kind of person where the first time a hard time comes in life, you’re just shattered – you’re running to, you know, the mental ward, or you’re just falling into a complete emotional meltdown, or whatever. Stability – the ability to endure, the ability to be hardy. But you don’t want to just be stable. You want to have *vitality* as well as stability. You want to live well. You want to live the good life. You want to flourish. You want to have joy, you want to have energy, you want to have a sense of being alive.

But what do you need below ground if you’re going to be like that above ground? You need the right soil, don’t you? And so Paul’s praying for this particular church – and for us even today – he’s praying that we will be “rooted and grounded” in what? In the love of God. He says, in so many words, that the love of God is the true soil of your soul and mine. That is the soil out of which you and I can live and draw real security – become the kind of people who have endurance, and can not just survive but thrive – have vitality in our lives. That’s what comes from this particular soil. And so we spent a couple of weeks on that soil, just talking about the love of God. We talked about God’s love in *creation*, just the fact that God was in a love affair with creation from day one. He looked upon everything He had made, and “behold, it was very good” – that statement to creation: “It’s good that you exist.” And also His love in *Christ*. Because of course things have come a very long, ugly way since that first time when God looked at the world and was full of love for it. Sin entered, all the ruin that sin has brought. And so Christ is the answer to all of that. Christ is God’s “No” to everything that ruins creation. He’s God’s “Yes” to the renewal of creation. We talked about that, and about the fact that God’s love for us in Christ – He receives us and renews us, He refines us and relieves us, and all of that.

But then last week we actually got back above ground. We started talking about what comes in our lives out of this soil. And we learned that out of the soil of God’s love, as we’re rooted and grounded in it, our lives begin to be filled – maybe this is unexpected to you– we begin to be filled with *festivity*. We talked about the fact that as the Holy Spirit roots us in God’s love, we begin to slowly develop what Paul calls here “the strength to comprehend” – and that takes strength – the strength to comprehend the sheer immensity of the love of God. It is utterly beyond all measuring. You begin to find it – as the Spirit pours the love of Christ into your heart, you begin to find the love of God everywhere, and in all things. You begin, you find it in the saving *grace* of God – my sins, though they are many and they are black, they are forgiven. You find His love in all creaturely *gifts* – the saving grace of God takes you back to the world, and God gives you the world again, and you receive it as a gift of your Father. You find the love of God even in His *government* of the big affairs of the

world and of your individual life – and that’s where we struggle sometimes, don’t we, because God governs in ways that puzzle us, but even there you find the love of God in all things. And as we said last week, gradually, over time, as the Spirit does this work, you are “tuned” to the deepest music of the world. The deep goodness of God beneath all things, the sheer joy of God beneath all things, finds an echo in your grateful festivity.

But this week I want to talk about a second fruit. It’s Easter. I want to talk about a second fruit – not this time festivity, but *activity*. Because Paul ends his prayer by saying, “I’m praying that you will” (as we were just saying) “know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you’ll just have the strength to reach out to what is beyond measurement and beyond reach.” What does he say the result of that will be? Look at the text: “so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God Himself.” What on earth does that even mean? Basically it means this: as your Father in heaven actively loves . . . God is just overflowing with love. He didn’t make us because He needed it; He didn’t save us because He needs us. He’s just – that’s just how He is, He’s just overflowing with active love, and when you are filled with God, that’s how you become. You begin to love like your Father. His own life of love starts bubbling up in you. That’s what it means to be living the resurrection life. It’s not just that your sins are forgiven; out of you begins to come the life of Christ’s own love. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and everyone who loves is born of this Father, this God, and knows God.”

I. A Caveat

Now, before we get there, to all that, though, I want to just register a little caveat, because this is very strange, but when you talk about *activity* in a church that believes in God’s free grace, when you start talking about what the Bible calls “good works” – especially, for whatever reason, in our so-called “Reformed” circles – it’s amazing to me how often this raises uneasiness. “Oh, no, we’re now talking about good works” – as if somehow in doing that we’re leaving behind the *receptive* posture that is so basic to faith. Now I do hope you realize that *is* basic to faith. Faith in God is non-contributory. Anywhere you hear religious teaching that says, “Well, you bring, you know, God kind of brings His stuff to the table, and you bring your stuff to the table, and you kind of work out this exchange, and you kind of earn your way into God’s grace somehow,” [that] is utterly false and ruinous. Faith is 100% receptive. It’s non-contributory. God brings everything; you bring nothing but need, and God pours into your need all of His sufficiency. That is it, and any religion that says otherwise is lying to you. Faith is self-despairing. Faith says, “I’ve got nothing. I’ve got worse than nothing; it’s not just that my bank account is empty – I’ve got major overdrafts with God.” And it brings nothing. And so people get a little nervous. Maybe if we start talking about, “Now you need to get out there and do good works,” that we’re kind of leaving that behind. Or maybe, maybe, even worse: we’re kind of robbing God of honor somehow, because now we’re not talking about His work anymore, we’re talking about ours.

Can I just tell you that whole way of thinking is utterly muddled? Do you realize – I trust you do – that Christ died our death, brethren, and He rose again so that we could *live*? Right? That’s the whole point of God’s forgiving our sins, is so we can live now as His forgiven children. I said to you a couple weeks ago: you need to get out of the courthouse, off the courthouse steps, into God’s living room and realize you were saved to be His children and to live like Him. That’s the whole point of the gospel. That’s God’s whole purpose in saving you. Paul will say elsewhere, the apostle Paul says elsewhere: “we were *created* in Christ Jesus” – to sit around and be thankful? To sit around and feel warm and forgiven? “Created in Christ Jesus *for good works*.” That means that when your faith goes out and starts working by love, when you start acting like children of God in the world, you’ve got to understand that the motivation and the energy that you feel in those times – that is part of God’s gift to you. That is part of His work in you. No less than what Jesus did outside of you is what God now is doing in you. So please don’t get into all that silliness that somehow we’re leaving something important behind when we talk about good works.

Now having given that caveat, I want to now just offer a contrast, because one way to see how God's love makes people active is to study what makes people slothful.

II. A Contrast

What is "slothfulness"? There are sloths in this world, and they're not all hanging in trees in the Amazon somewhere. There are sloths all over Long Island.

The sloth is dull. The sloth is listless. The sloth is halfhearted. The sloth is averse to effort. What brings a person to a place of being a sloth? I would suggest to you there are two basic things that lead to slothfulness: one is *hopelessness*, and the other is *selfishness*.

Now it should be obvious how *hopelessness* cripples the work of love, because the hopeless person, all this person sees or anticipates is brokenness. This kind of sloth looks around at the world out of hopelessness and just says, "Vanity of vanities, everything is vanity; everything's such a mess. Why even try?" It's like saying "vanity of vanities" without any faith, without any confidence in God's "deeper music," and so eventually it just cripples your love. You just kind of have this mopey, you know, all self-pitying despair, like, you know, "I just . . . everything's so hard, and, you know, God always wrecks my best plans" – that's the very opposite of Jesus! Jesus, friends, let me tell you: He bled and suffered beyond what you can ever begin to imagine; and He endured all that with fire in His belly, because of the *joy* set before Him. It carried Him through the cross, and He endured. So note how hopelessness, but also selfishness . . .

Selfishness cripples the work of love and makes us slothful – why? Because the energies of the selfish are exhausted from chasing empty lusts. This kind of selfish slothfulness is the kind of aversion a man feels toward his wife after hours in pornographic mire. You've got nothing left for her, because you're so exhausted from the emptiness of your lust. It's the kind of half-heartedness a woman feels toward her home and toward her family after hours in a mental shopping mall with no credit limit. Of course it just looks like a dump after that. And you're just halfhearted – what's the use of investing? Self-focus, friends, is *consuming* – my feelings, my freedom, my self-expression, my little social dramas, my career, my future, my comforts, my problems, my issues, my self-discovery, my fulfillment. You ever been around someone like this? You know what they are, people like this, who are just all about themselves? They're exhausting. They have no energy, and pretty soon you don't either, because they just sucked you into their little, you know, private black hole.

But if you, brethren, unlike this, you know the fundamental "music" of this world is good, you know that God's life-giving love is basic reality, that deeper and mightier than even everything that warps and distorts and defiles creation is God's eternal song of joy in Christ – He made all things by Christ, He made all things for Christ – and when that gets inside of you, friends, you have no room for *hopelessness*. Listen, I'm an "Eeyore." I instinctively get hopelessness. You have no room for clinging hopelessness if you believe that God is who He says He is for you and for the world in Christ. And you surely have no room in your life for *selfishness*. You start to want to respond to the call of God's love and joy. You want to play along with the "music." You want to find ways to participate, not just in the *festivity* of God's love, but in the *activity* of God's love.

So with that all said, I want now very quickly to just give you a threefold call to action.

III. A Call to Action

I'm going to give you a call today to *activity*. Please hear me in this. I'm gonna move quickly, but I really, really – I'm kinda gonna go after this a little bit, all right?. So with your "roots," your roots – don't forget this! it all comes out of your roots – with your roots firmly grounded in God's love, here's your threefold call to action as Easter people, as Jesus people. Number one, if you want to be active

with the love of God – and don't sit and think this is someday going to zap you from on high; you've got to work at this and get focused on it – number one . . .

Know your circle. Know your circle. What in heaven's name might that mean? It's really pretty basic. When God put you in the world, He gave you a body. And the interesting thing about bodies is they can't be everywhere. That means that your body is some place, and God has put you in that place, and in that place He's given you a circle of influence. You have people that are your people you can influence, because God put you with them. You have connections; you have stuff to do; God has entrusted a very particular place and very particular circumstances and situations, to you in your circle of influence, and that is not an accident. What I'm saying is, we need to take a very intelligent look at the sphere that God has given you, right now – not tomorrow! can I just be blunt? tomorrow is not in your circle yet – God has given you a circle where, right now, you have opportunities for loving action. "As we have therefore opportunity," Paul says in Galatians, "let us do good."

Now here's the thing – this is why this is important. You and I sometimes tend to waste the fuel of God's love by doing two things with our circle. Either we *run outside* the circle – and some of you know what this is like; this takes all different forms. You know, the person who's always patrolling Facebook, while completely neglecting their household, would be an example. That's not in your circle – get back inside your circle, pay attention to what God has given in your circle. You know, some of us have this problem of, we are so, we are so preoccupied with, you know, our little life issues, or maybe your Smartphone, or whatever it is that kind of like sucks you in – you don't even notice providential opportunities God puts right in front of you in a supermarket or on the sidewalk or wherever you might be – you're so zoned out, living somewhere else than in your circle, you don't even see what's right in front of you. Or some of us have this problem of dreaming of some future: "Oh, you know, I can't wait until I have, like, that relationship or I have that job or I'm making that kind of money or I go to that school or I get that degree or I've got those friends or my body looks like . . ." What on earth are you doing with your *present* life? "Oh, that house, that neighborhood, that car . . ." What are you doing with what God's given you *now*? Maybe God will take you out before you get to any such future. Look at your circle. Don't run outside your circle.

But sort of flipping over – you know, same music, different page, is *under-inhabiting* the circle. Some of us want to run outside the circle, some of us frankly just under-inhabit the circle God has given us. We're well inside of where we could be influencing. There are many of us, brethren, who really are not pursuing our relationships in our communities. There are some of you – you know why you're lonely, you know why your life kind of stinks? Because you don't invest. You're not really investing in your marriage; you're not really investing in your kids; you're not pouring yourself into your neighbors (that's why they don't know you); you're not pouring yourself into your coworkers or your schoolmates or, you know, even your friends – you're not pouring yourself out. So your circle's all shrunk – and it makes you feel bad some days; and you think you need a therapist to deal with your loneliness – no, you need to inhabit your circle. That's what you need. Or we don't cultivate excellence in our vocations – we kind of do this halfhearted job at whatever God has put before us to do, whether it's in the house or in the workplace or at the school, or whatever – and we just kind of under-inhabit. We don't, like, throw ourselves into it.

Can I just say something about parenting in connection with this? I'm a little wound up today, so just kind of bear with me here. Some of you parents enable this with your kids. You really do. Some of you parents allow your children to stay in their relational comfort zones throughout their entire lives. Some of you, I think, are actually more concerned that your kids be popular than that they be loving. And you let them stay in their little relational comfort zones. You don't draw them out to pour themselves into the aged, or the very young, or the unpopular kids, or, you know, strangers, or whatever it might be. You don't draw them out to do that. You allow them to lose themselves in these lazy frivolities, or – for the more driven among us – you allow them to just over-invest in this maniacal preparation for some fantasy future. And they do not develop the mindfulness to notice and

pour themselves into real opportunities to love that are right in front of them. And they need you to guide them in that, brethren, because that's how God is. He *seeks* people.

Because here's the thing, whether young or old: if we're not eager to love where we are, if you don't like the circle you're in, you will definitely not be eager to love anywhere else under any other circumstances with any other people. Know your circle, and fill it.

Number one, know your circle. Number two: *hone your skills*. You say, "Pastor, this is so, like – where's Jesus?" This is what – this is Jesus, this is the Jesus life: hone your skills. Because you know, here's the thing: if you're aware of opportunity, that doesn't profit you at all if you don't have the skill to do something with the opportunity. Jesus people, resurrection people, Easter people are honing their skills.

Now I want to very quickly give you three sub-points under this point, under "hone your skills." Number one, especially to you who are young: *time wasted is lost*. Time wasted is lost. You're going to spend the rest of your life reaping what you are sowing right now. And I know when you're young it's hard, hard to believe this – it's so easy to be just kind of like, "Oh, I have forever." You don't have forever. Many of us in this room are looking back now and saying, "You know, this sickly plant creeping up out of the ground that I'm dealing with now – I planted that thing 20 years ago, I planted it 40 years or I planted it 60 years ago, because I wasted time, and now I'm reaping the sickly fruit of that." Time wasted is lost. Redeem the time, says Paul. That's the Jesus way. Every single day there is something to learn, or something to practice, that will make you a better lover of God, a better lover of your neighbor, a better lover of your world. First sub-point under "hone your skills": time wasted is lost.

Second sub-point is: *fools don't build, they react*. Fools do not build, they react. Fools only respond to pressure. "Oh no, my marriage is falling apart. Oh no, my kids are rebelling. Oh no, a financial crisis, oh my (whatever)." They respond to crisis, they respond to prompting, some are always rioting about things; but they do not prepare so they're ready when the pressure comes. The prudent man foresees the evil, and takes evasive action. The simple fool just walks right on into the storm, because he's not thinking, he's just reacting; he's not building anything; he doesn't plan, he has no blueprints, he doesn't have any sense of where he's going, and he just kind of meanders through the pressures of life. It's kind of like – I'm sure some of you have experienced this; it never happens at our house, of course, but – it's kind of like the child who, when you send him or her to do something, only does the very, very, very bare minimum. "Take the trash to the garbage can, my son." He plants it next to the garbage can. What you realize is this: this child is reacting, not building. He has no understanding that the reason why we take the trash out of our house is so people don't walk through our house and see piles of trash. We want, like, a nice-looking home. There's a project here, there's a vision here of what kind of home we want to have. The child hasn't got that vision in his head, so he's just doing the bare minimum. That's a fool: reacting, not building. And you teach to that.

Third sub-point under "hone your skills," very important in Long Island: *it's not about you*. It's not about you. Can I just say: you have skills, you have more skills you could have, but your skills or my skills are not assets in your or my personal success story. Please hear that: God does not give you skills and gifts to be assets in your little personal success story. God gives you those things as a steward [*inaudible*], and they are to be offered back to the God who owns your entire life, whether you realize it or not, and who owns the entire world. He is the High King. It's not about you. Whatever you do – whether you eat, or drink, or invest money, or buy a car, or buy clothing, or build a friendship, or get married, or whatever you do – do it all to . . . what? The glory of the High King. It's not about you.

Know your circle. Hone your skills. But thirdly, if we're going to talk about real life in Christ, that God has saved us . . . [*inaudible*]. Know your circle. Hone your skills. Number three: *guard your tongue*. Why is that? It seems awfully specific. Because Paul says, I'm praying that as you're rooted

and ground in Christ's love, you will be "filled with all the fullness of God." And you can't spend, literally, ten seconds reading your Bible from Genesis before you realize that from the first moment of creaturely existence, your God speaks in a way that brings life. You be like God, you be like that. The most powerful weapon, the most powerful tool in your entire arsenal of life, is the thing between your teeth. It is your tongue. Life and death are in its power. So bear God's image well when you open your lips.

Let me say what that means negatively. Some of you who know a lot of theology really need to pay attention right now. We have a little thing in our house. Here's the slogan. It may sound cheesy, but you'll remember it, and it's important. *When you're hot, do not.* When you're hot – it ain't rocket science – do not. Don't open your lips. Do not hit "Send." When you're hot, do not, because Jesus wouldn't. And if you will not do that – everything else in your life may be tamed, James says, but your tongue. You figure that much out – keep your lips sealed, when your heart is hot – you figure that much out, you are miles down the road of holiness and glorifying God in the world.

But you know what, you never drive out any bad habits by trying not to have bad habits. Let me give you the positive. You do this, you won't have time to spit out hateful words and spew angry texts. *Master the art of affirmation.* Now I'm just going to tell you, I speak about this as the chief of sinners. Master the art of affirmation. God builds a world, and what does He say of it? He says, "Very good." Do you have any idea the power with people around you in your life of finding ways to say to them every day, "You are a gift; it is good that you exist"? Do you men have any living idea how your marriage would begin to blossom if you would just find a way to make your wife feel that every day? "You are a gift to me. It is good that you exist. I am thankful that you exist"? Or your children? Or your husband? You wives, with your biting tongue. You know, men flex muscle, women flex the muscle between their teeth, and just spit out these things that tear down your husbands. Find ways to speak to your husband, to your child, to your wife, to your friends: "It's good that you exist." And this is so simple. I have had people send me one-line emails, one-line texts, in my day, basically just, "Pastor, you know, Ben, I know you're there, I'm just thankful for you, praying for you" – I can feel my heart lifting – just the thought and a few moments of verbal investment. And you know, the shocking thing is, I know people who think this is cheesy – the same people whose mouths are sewers of criticism and downright hateful speech, even cursing people out. Take a little time to balance the scales, for the love of God. Affirm. Affirm. "I rejoice at the gift of you."

God blesses. And I said to you at the very beginning of this series that the thing that is most true of any creature is what God says of it. That person who just crossed your path [*inaudible*], that person is created in God's image, in many cases a brother or sister you're going to live with for eternity. Say what God says. It's so simple. Let's find ways to do it.

Rooted and grounded in God's love, empty in faith, receiving the outpouring of the love of God from heaven, know your circle, hone your circle, guard your tongue.

Conclusion

The best way to celebrate the resurrection is not to hunting for Easter eggs or whatever you find enjoyable on this day. The best way to celebrate the resurrection is not Facebook posts, not showing up for worship – those are all fine things. The most glorious way to celebrate the resurrection is to "walk in newness of life." Not just the festivity of God's love, but the wonderfully energetic activity of it. And so, because "Christ is risen," beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Amen.