

For This Reason

Ephesians 3:14-19
Sermon by Mark Schloneger
February 17, 2019

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (NRSV)

For this reason.

Those are the first three words of our scripture text this morning.

For this reason, Paul writes, he prays to God for the church in Ephesus.

Tomorrow, I'll be traveling to Laurelville Mennonite Church Center in Pennsylvania for a meeting of the Values-Based Leadership Program.

This has been helpful for me to not only reflect on leadership with other church and business leaders, but to think about myself, my gifts, and passions.

At the end of this program, we are each invited to write a personal mission statement: the reason for our life and work.

For this reason.

Have you ever thought about that?

What is your reason?

Why are you here?

Why do you work?

What is the purpose in your living, marrying, parenting, learning, worshiping, whatever you do?

What is our reason for . . . for this?

For our structures, our meetings, our services, our potlucks?

For this reason.

Yes, those are the first three words of our scripture text this morning, but those same three words are repeated three times in the first three chapters of Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

"For this reason" is Paul's way of reminding his readers that what he is about to write encompasses what he has written before.

And so, we've been reminded this morning
that the words from our text
encompass the words that came before them,
and those words encompass the words that came before them, too.

For this reason.
For this reason.
For this reason.

Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus
ushers us into a wormhole
that hurls us backwards through space and time
into another dimension,
until we arrive at the very beginning,
the very essence from which all things come into being,
the reason for why you are here,
the reason for why I am here,
the reason for why we are here, together, this morning.
It's the same reason why Paul is driven to pray
the prayer that we have before us this morning.

But what is that reason?
The writer identified as Paul begins his letter like this:
"To the saints in Ephesus who are faithful in Christ Jesus."
Paul writes that he has heard of the Ephesians' faith in Jesus
and of their love for each other.
For this reason, he writes -- the first time he uses that phrase --
he is constantly giving thanks to God.
Ephesians, chapter 1, verse 15.

Paul then goes on to explain what their faith means,
and he reveals the mystery that God revealed to him.
And the mystery is this:
Christ is our peace.
Christ has made us one.
Christ has broken down the dividing walls of hostility.
Christ has abolished in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances.
Christ has created in his body one new humanity in place of two.
And through all this, Christ is making peace and reconciling us to God in one body through the cross.
For this reason, Paul writes, the second time he uses this phrase, Chapter 3, verse 1.
for this reason, Paul has been called by God to this ministry of reconciliation
to the proclamation of God's grace for all in the name of Jesus,

and to suffering in prison for the sake of the Gentiles.

Paul isn't proclaiming a future hope.

Paul is proclaiming a present reality.

In Jesus, human beings have been reconciled with God and with each other.

And the walls, have come tumbling down.

And the walls, have come crumbling, crumbling, down.

For this reason, Paul stakes his life on proclaiming that message.

Yet, if you read the news this week or any week,

you know that our world, our country, our community continue to be divided by race, religion, sex, education, class, and politics.

And you know that both by what makes the news and what doesn't.

You also know that these divisions

have found their ways inside the church.

The people who Paul says have been called together

to give witness to God's reconciliation in Christ,

do not fully embody Paul's reason for writing and working and suffering.

You know that this announcement of the end of hostilities and divisions

falls upon a world full of hostilities and divisions and threats and violence.

When faced with the incongruity of what we believe and what we see,

we either adjust our reasons so that they have little to do with the realities of our lives or our neighbors' lives –or - or we find new reasons .

For this reason, we build walls wider and longer and higher and deeper.

For this reason, we can begin to believe that the gospel to which we have been called has little bearing on flesh and blood in the here and now.

And for this reason, because our hearts and our minds are held captive by our fears of the other --

we give our consent to other's **separation**

even as we proclaim the gospel of **reconciliation**.

This is the reason why Paul is driven to pray –

to pray for God's Spirit to be at work in us –

so that we live our lives in faith

rooted and grounded together in Christ

to reflect the Christ's love

that is higher, and deeper, and wider, and longer than any walls we build.

For this reason.

What is your reason?

Why are you here?
Why do you work?
What is our reason for . . . for this?

Sometimes, its good
to travel backwards and forward through space and time
so that we arrive both at the beginning and ending,
the very essence from which all things come into being,
the reason for why you are here,
the reason for why I am here,
the reason for why we are here, together, this morning.
the reason why Paul is driven to pray
the prayer that we have before us this morning.

And the reason is this:

The God of Israel,
the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
the God of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah,
the God who created the whole world,
who traced the rivers, who lifted up the mountains, who pushed down the valleys,
who formed you in your mother's womb
and is the author of your next breath.

This God intimately knows you,
passionately loves you,
and has become flesh,
in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

God has done this in order to reveal and to enact God's grace,
reconciling all human beings with God, with each other, with all of creation.

Through the Holy Spirit,
God breathes life into human beings.
But not just any old life,
not a life of isolation, condemnation, degradation, aggravation, exploitation, segregation, manipulation.
but a life of vocation, a life of transformation, a life of participation.
Participation with God in God's work:
creating, liberating, redeeming, forgiving, saving, and transforming.

Now hear this. You. Yes, you:
You participate with God in this story:

by acknowledging God's forgiveness of sins in Jesus,
by repenting of sin,
by receiving the gift of freedom,
by embracing the community of the saints,
by loving your God, your neighbors and your enemies,
by seeking justice for the oppressed,
by caring for all of creation,
and by trusting in the final triumph of God's grace.

The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth means
that God's passion for life is stronger than our enemies' powers of death.
It means that God's steadfast love is deeper than the evil one's hate.
It means that God's mercy is wider than your sin, your guilt, your shame.

For this reason,
we, the congregation of Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship
with the help of and by the power of the Holy Spirit,
testify that God calls us
to worship and grow spiritually,
to build healthy Christian community,
to welcome the diversity, sharing, and participation of all God's people,
to equip each other to carry out God's call for our lives,
so that we can be Christ's loving, healing, caring presence in the world.

For this reason . . .

For this reason . . .

For this reason . . .

For this reason, I kneel before God,
from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.
I pray that out of God's glorious riches God may strengthen us with power
through the Spirit in our inner being,
so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith.
And I pray that we, being rooted and established in love,
may have power,
together with all the saints,
to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,
and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—
that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

And now to the One who, by the power at work within us,
is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.

To God be the glory in Christ Jesus and the church throughout all generations,
forever and ever. Amen.