

## I

When my wife Amy and I lived in Decatur, the remnants of a big Gulf hurricane swept over Alabama and Georgia. The storm brought buckets of heavy rain for days, softening the Georgia soil into a thin, light brown soup. Then came the winds, gusting and whistling through the trees for hours on end. And with all that rain to loosen up the soil, and then all that wind coming from every different direction, some of the trees that weren't deeply rooted began to fall.

Some trees fell on powerlines, knocking out electricity for the next several days. Some trees fell on houses, smashing through gutters and roofs and windows. One tree around the corner from our place fell directly onto somebody's car, smashing it flat into the driveway like a saltine cracker.

Mind you, not all the trees fell – not even the vast majority of them. But when the rains came, and the winds blew, the trees that weren't deeply rooted crashed to the ground. Thanks be to God, no one in our neighborhood was injured or killed, but even so, enough trees fell that it created a giant mess for everyone, and that mess lasted long after the storm had passed.

## II

There is a revealing aspect to storms. Before the storm, to the untrained eye, all the trees in our neighborhood looked mature and stately and solid. But after the storm passed, it

was easy to see which trees were deeply rooted and grounded, and which ones had not.

We human beings are like that too, aren't we? When the storms of life come at us, when the rains fall and the winds blow, our grounding and our roots are put to the test.

And this notion of being deeply rooted and grounded is at the heart of our reading this morning from Ephesians.

## III

We're continuing this morning with our read through the Book of Ephesians, which, as we've said all along, isn't a book in the traditional sense, but rather a letter addressed to the followers of Jesus who lived in the late first century in and around the city of Ephesus, which lies in modern-day Turkey near the northeastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

Most, if not all, of the people living in and around the city of Ephesus in the late first century were Gentiles, that is, they were born and raised outside of the Jewish faith. And as we've seen in our reading so far, much of the first half of the letter is concerned with addressing issues of Christian identity.

In chapter one, the Ephesians were reminded that although they were once a people without hope and cut off from God, God has adopted them in Christ and made them part of God's

family, with all the rights and responsibilities that entails.

Last week, we read from chapter 2, in which the Ephesians were reminded that God is about the business of reconciliation, of bringing people into right relationship with God and each other, and thereby building the church together into nothing less than a dwelling place for God's own self.

We turn our attention this morning to chapter 3, roughly the midpoint of the letter, wherein the sender of the letter shares with the Ephesians a prayer for them, and by extension, a prayer for us.

So listen now for a Word from God from Ephesians 3:14-21.

*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 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 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power 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, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can*

*ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Rooted and grounded in love.

#### IV

The first day in his class began like most first days of class begin in higher education settings – with the distribution and discussion of the syllabus. And that's what we did for a few minutes – we went over the readings and the projects and made note of the exam dates and the professor's office hours.

But then he said something that I will never forget. He said, "Every morning, I pray through my class rosters. I pray for you by name and lift you before God. If there is something I can pray for you specifically, please let me know." And then he went on with class.

But all these years later, I remember that day in his class. I remember the look in his eyes as he told us that he made a daily habit of praying for each of us by name. I knew that his invitation to share with him any specific ways in which he could be in prayer for us was not contrived or an attempt to impress us with his piety, but obviously born out of a deep rootedness, deep grounding of his faith and love in Christ.

My friend, maybe you don't have a class roll book or roster, but I imagine

if you took two minutes you could make a list of 15 people with whom you have a close, personal relationship. Maybe your list includes members of your household or extended family. Maybe your list includes coworkers and colleagues or neighbors and acquaintances.

However you want to make up your list of 15 or so names, here's a practical challenge for you this week. For the next seven days, spend some each day praying for those people on your list by name. If you know of specific needs in their lives, then of course, by all means lift those needs before God.

But whether you know of a specific need or not, I encourage you to pray for the people on your list with the words of the letter to the Ephesians - that, according to the riches of his glory, God may grant that they may be strengthened in their inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith as they are being rooted and grounded in love.

You and I both know that not all storms are the same. You and I both know that not all storms affect all people in the same time or in the same ways. You and I both know that we don't always know what people around us are going through, even the 15 people who are closest to us.

It is a powerful thing to know that someone whom you know and care about is praying for you by name. I

wonder what might begin to happen, both in your life and in the lives of the people on your list, if you made a commitment to that simple prayer discipline this week?

I wonder if, somehow, someday, both you and them might come to a love of Christ that is so deep, and so wide, and so broad, and so long, that it passes all human categories of knowing and understanding. I wonder if both you and them might be filled with the fullness of God.

But here's the funny thing I've discovered about prayer. When I pray for someone else, I mean, really pray for them, I'm not always sure it has any effect on them. But it *always* has an effect on me. When I pray for someone *else* to be rooted and grounded in the love of Christ, I find myself feeling more rooted and grounded. When I pray for someone else to be filled with the fullness of God, I find that I feel more full of the fruits of the Spirit.

## V

And Lord knows, these are difficult days in which we find ourselves. There is so much uncertainty and enmity and bitterness in our world, in our nation, and indeed, right here in our own community. Just the briefest of glances at the news or shows that we are living through a season of many storms, and it seems like we've barely begun to assess what has been damaged by one when another comes behind it.

Not for nothing, all of the “you’s” in this part of Ephesians are in the second person plural – that is, they’re y’alls. This is a letter written to the church, to all y’all, or all of youn’s, so to speak. It’s a letter written not just to the Ephesians, but to we Athenians, too.

And so I give thanks that our ancestors in faith sacrificed so much just to protect and preserve this letter over so many generations that you and I might read it together today. For we are not the first people of God to find ourselves living in a season of storms, one on top of another. We are not the first people of God to find ourselves living in a time of enmity and bitterness.

The author of Ephesians says, “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, and I pray.”

There are generations of saints who have gone before us, who, even now are praying for us this same prayer – that we will have strength in our innermost being through the power of his Spirit. That Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith, that no matter how hard the winds may blow and beat against us, we will remain rooted and grounded in love. That even in this season, when so many among us are feeling frightened and angry and fearful and empty, we will be filled with all the fullness of God.

In this season of great division and bitterness and heartbreak, in this season of storms, may we continue to be

rooted and grounded in love. For if we are not rooted and grounded in love, if we respond to hatred with hatred, if we repay violence with violence, even if it’s just a few among us, the damage will endure far longer than the storms themselves.

So may we have the courage in these days to be the church, the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood, trusting in his promises, not just in here for an hour or two on Sunday mornings, but out there, on the streets, in the offices and classrooms and living rooms and social media feeds and all the places where live and move and have our being.

And to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.