

“Rooted, Grounded, Home.”

*A sermon preached on Ephesians 3.14-21 (focused on v. 17)
by Emily Hull McGee at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC
on Sunday, October 14, 2018*

I.

“Here’s the church, and here’s the steeple. Open the doors, and see all the people. Close the doors and hear them pray. Open the doors, and they all walk away.”

I’m certain by the look of recognition on many of your faces that I’m not the only one who learned this little song in Sunday School many many moons ago. If you were like me and many of my classmates, you delighted in any opportunity to put your hands to work. From the youngest of ages, little sayings like these were building blocks in one’s understanding about church, right? For if “here’s the church and here’s the steeple” is what we learned then the church must be a nice rectangular building with some structure shooting up to the heavens. “Open the doors, and see all the people”: church is a place where people go. “Close the doors, and hear them pray”: church is the place to pray, and prayers should happen behind closed doors. “Open the doors, and they all walk away”: apparently in the church, the doors open and shut a lot!

I know I was a questioning kid (and am often now a questioning adult!), but as I folded and unfolded my hands throughout my childhood, I couldn’t help but often to wonder: what if a church didn’t *have* a steeple? Or a building for that matter? Would it still be a church? What about all the other things that churches do besides praying? Isn’t church more than just a series of doors opening and closing? What happens next when the people walk

away? Do they race each other to the cafeteria for Sunday lunch, or do they just go back to their houses? And where is God in this church the people call home?

II.

It seems such wonderings could stretch back through the centuries, as people of all generations have wondered what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ. If you joined us for worship last Sunday, you'll remember that the church at Ephesus was one such community. The apostle Paul, or more likely, one who wrote in his honor and on his behalf, wrote to these Christians about their lives of faith. Last week, we heard the first of four exhortations from the writer of Ephesians in this beautiful prayer in the middle of the letter, lifting to God a hope for them to be "strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit." And today, we unpack that second part of the prayer from verse 17: "[I pray] that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, man you are being rooted and grounded in love."

Taken together, these first two petitions to the church at Ephesus and the church ever still, remind us that we are strengthened in our inner being *as Christ dwells within us*, filling us to be 'rooted and grounded in love.' For "to be rooted in love is ... to be rooted in Christ."¹ Our inner being doesn't first have to be strong in order for Christ to dwell within us; rather it is through Christ's dwelling that we find strengthening. Because where Christ is, there is love.

This idea of being 'rooted and grounded' in love doesn't just show up here in Ephesians. We hear a similar exhortation in Colossians that says: "As

¹ Allen Verhey and Joseph S. Harvard, *Ephesians*, from *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p126.

you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him...”² It seems there’s something significant in the Christian life to this idea of Christ dwelling and making a home in us, such that we can be rooted and grounded in love. Faithful people throughout time have echoed this claim, folks like John Donne who once said, “Christ is at home with you, he is at home within you, and there is the nearest way to find him.”³ And yet in a world where an increasing number of people resonate less with words like rooted, grounded, and home, and resonate more with words like immigrant, refugee, exile, sojourner, wayfarer, tourist, migrant, occupant, homeless, nomad, roamer, displaced, what does it mean to imagine our lives as a home for Christ, and Christ’s love as a foundation for our lives?

III.

Let’s start with the call to be rooted and grounded in love. For when I think of such an invitation, I think of our church. Because with every passing week that the Special Committee on Facilities and Mission did their work together to determine how best to address our church’s comprehensive facilities needs, it became clear that above any other reason for doing work on our building — even good reasons, like leaking roofs and inefficient systems — was the call to recommit ourselves to this corner here in downtown. Time and time again, First Baptist has affirmed its location in the heart of our city, and this time is no different. We feel God calling us here, in this place and through this space, rooted and grounded in this land we’ve occupied for nearly 100 years.

² Colossians 2:7

³ John Donne quoted in a Lenten meditation called “They Took My Lord Away” and found here: <https://thevalueofsparrows.com/2017/03/27/lent-they-took-my-lord-away-by-john-donne/>

Thus, if a core commitment of ours is to be here, then we need to be in a space that's dry and safe and functioning and hospitable to all who will call it home. But if in all the work we're doing, we end up re-rooting ourselves in this building and re-grounding ourselves at the intersection of Fifth and Spruce, but forget to first be rooted and grounded in love, then would that we not be doing any of this! We would merely be a shell of a church and a steeple, a building filled with people who would have missed the point entirely.

Having said that, I have heard you and your prayers. I'm hearing your convictions and deep commitments to our church. I delight when you tell me of your passions for God's work of Love in which you participate through our fellowship. In all of this, I trust that we're not going to miss the point by renovating a church, restoring a steeple, but overlooking the renewal of all the people. But in order for our work together to not be in vain, I believe we must do two things: make our church house a home for Christ, and invite him to dwell within us.

When Josh and I got married, we received a number of lovely gifts for our house — towels and kitchen utensils and things like that. I remember struggling to know how best to articulate my gratitude for these ordinary items in each thank you note I wrote, and my always wise mother suggested to me: “why don't you say, ‘thank you for making our house a home?’”

Even though I know it really doesn't take a blender to make a 'house' a 'home,' this dichotomy has captured my imagination. For “home” signifies a place of permanence, an enduring residence; for “to be at home somewhere is more than simply having a place to stay.” But there is a real difference

between a home and a house, right? A “house” is a building, the sum total of floors and walls and bricks and siding and ceiling and nails, whereas a “home” is a dwelling place, filled with the comprehensive sweep of memories and stories and rituals and relationships and significance. Houses can be bought and sold, renovated and restored, and yes, they can even demolished. A home is an indwelling, never commodified or consumed, a refuge of safety, vulnerability, and hospitality where we are enough and can be at rest.⁴

I think it’s precisely this difference that informed Maya Angelou who once said, ‘the ache for home lives in all of us.’⁵ In a world where such meaning and refuge and relationships of ‘home’ are in short supply even as shelters and spaces and houses are built all around us, it’s no wonder such an ache exists powerfully in our midst. Even as we make our dwelling place inside this lovely church house, how might we make it a home for all who ache, all who will enter in, but most profoundly for Christ himself?

III.

His room was called ‘the cupboard under the stairs.’ Well, I suppose you could call it a room — four walls, a floor, a ceiling. Spiders and paint cans were his roommates, and the only natural light that filtered in came from the crack beneath the door. The house that surrounded the cupboard bore no signs of his young life: he was in no photograph atop the mantle; no things or clothes or toys bought especially with him in mind — everything was a broken and used hand-me-down from his bullying cousin, and the pained

⁴ With great gratitude for Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh’s treatment of ‘home’ and ‘dwelling’ in their helpful book, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, p56.

⁵ As quoted in Diana Butler Bass’s *Grounded: Finding God in the World*, p163.

conversation the family had about him happened around him, almost as if he wasn't even there to hear it. You see, for the Dursley family, their nephew and cousin Harry Potter was no more than an unwelcome houseguest who deserved the very least and last of what they would offer.⁶

Clearly, J. K. Rowling's fictional characters are not the model of hospitality. For what kind of home is one where you're never made to feel welcome or never made a room?

I wonder, brothers and sisters, what we might become if you open wide your doors and invite Christ to move in for good, right here in your midst. What might it do for you to welcome Christ in your life as a permanent house-mate instead of occasional house-guest? Might you move him out of the guest room or the cupboard under the stairs? Would you update the proverbial pictures on the mantle, give him his own key, assign him his share of the chores, give up your beloved space and your resources, and allow him to truly nestle in? How might your lives, your homes, yourselves be wholly transformed from the inside out when, in the words of *The Message*, "Christ live[s] in you as you open the door and invite him in"?⁷

Then I think about that church and all those people within. If each one of us welcomes Christ into our lives more fully than we've ever welcomed anyone into our homes, how then might our church house and home be transformed? Will we let ourselves be rooted in Something deeper than this downtown soil, grounded in Someone stronger than even the sturdiest

⁶ With thanks to Karen Chakoian for the comparison of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter as unwelcome houseguest to how so many of us as Christians treat Christ who desires to move into our homes and our lives. Karen Chakoian, "Ephesians 3:14-21," *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, p282.

⁷ From Eugene Peterson's translation of Ephesians 3:17 in *The Message*.

limestone foundation? If Love provides that Source, then what unique marks will an indwelling Christ leave within our church? Sure we'll redo this old church building and restore that old steeple tower, but as the *church* – the people, the gathering – will we risk renovating our shared life together as God's people? We have given up building and sacred spaces and rooms and closets and stairs – will we summon the courage to give up control over how our remaining spaces will be used, how our money will be allocated, what we'll do within this church house of ours, and who we'll welcome into Christ's home here? What will God ask of us in order that we might become a *boundless home*, where each and every day we are building love far beyond these walls?

IV.

I think I'd like to amend that little church rhyme. "Here's the church who is the people. Open our home to Christ and his people. Unfurl our lives, our hearts, our house, our hands. Welcome Christ in whose love we are rooted, grounded, and stand."

Amen!