

Ephesians 3: 14-21

Grounded!

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“You are grounded!” Not a sentence that is a welcomed parental verdict by many teenagers. Grounding is a form of punishment used by parents, usually for older children, preteens and teenagers that restricts their movement outside of the home, such as visiting friends or using the car and they are not allowed to go anywhere but school and few required places. Sometimes it is combined with the withdrawal of privileges for computer, video games, telephone or TV, depending on the offence. This temporary parentally induced house arrest is meant to correct some behavior that went against family rules in hopes that those rules will be kept and honored in the future.

All of this is my guess, of course. I was a pretty good kid, even during my teenage years. I never got grounded. But I remember that a friend of mine got constantly grounded by her mother, which was always a big crisis and caused great distress to my friend.

While to be “grounded” as a form of punishment means the end of the world to a teenager, to be “grounded” in life, in faith, in God’s love is something welcomed, something I believe we are all looking for. This morning I want to share with you some thoughts on what it means to be grounded in God’s love with the help of the apostle Paul.

Paul visited the city of Ephesus twice, once only shortly, and the second time for almost three years. In Acts we read that he was preaching daily in the synagogue, and then moved his operations to a more public place. He worked through a number of crises, and when he felt that he had done everything he could, he continued his travels. His goal was to get back to Jerusalem. Once there it gets a little complicated. In Jerusalem, Paul was arrested on false charges and put in prison. Paul felt compelled to appeal to Caesar, and thus he was taken to Rome for trial. There in Rome, he was granted considerable freedom of access, and thus he continued

to minister. It is here, in Rome, that the history of the Apostle Paul (and the church) ends in the Book of Acts (see chapter 28).

While in prison/house arrest/serious grounding, Paul penned several letters (also known as epistles), which came to be known as the “prison epistles:” Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. These letters were hand-delivered to those communities.

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is different from all of his other letters. It is not a teaching letter, or a problem-solving letter, or a conflict-resolution letter, nor is it a personal letter. It is a deeply theological letter of New Testament revelation. It seeks to refocus our grounding from being grounded in the world to being grounded in God’s love. This is Paul’s prayer for the faithful. Listen to it again: “...that through faith Christ may dwell in your hearts in love. With deep roots and firm foundations may you, in the company with all God’s people, be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ’s love, and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge. So may you be filled with the very fullness of God.” (vs. 17-19) (1)

This is really deep stuff. To dwell in God’s love through Christ means that all of who we are is steeped in God’s love. For some it might be a scary proposition. Maybe this is a bit too much, a bit too close to God. For others this experience of dwelling in God’s love each minute of every day might be the ultimate goal of faith. Those people will give everything to God, even their life, to dwell in God’s love. But for you and me, for us regular Christians, we wonder if that kind of depth, that kind of groundedness is really attainable. And if it is, what might be the cost of coming so close to God that we want to give our lives to God? Would we be willing to pay it?

We know that the world is filled with remarkable people – in the Bible and in real life – who pour themselves out for God and Christ. The world and the church call them mystics. We know them by their names: Moses, Abraham, Elijah, Peter, John, and Paul. The church was built on mystics like Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Benedict, Meister Eckhart, Francis of Assisi, Hildegard von Bingen, Mechtilde of Magdeburg, Julian and Norwich, C.S. Lewis, Thomas Merton, Evelyn Underhill, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Henri Nouwen...

To speak of mystics/mysticism today might get you an appointment with the psychiatrist for it is fraught with misunderstanding. One of the definitions is “a belief characterized by self-delusion or dreamy confusion of

thought,” which I think is the definition most of us think of first when we hear the word mystic. Unfortunately it is true that some people with serious mental illness have used religion as an outlet for their obsessions and fantasies. People who have had an intense spiritual experience or vision of faith that brought them into close relationship with God might seem to us a bit unstable and delusional, and scare us.

But if we start to dig into understanding mysticism, we find out that it simply is the spirituality of the direct experience of God. It is not about the mystical experience but the lasting experience of God, leading to the transformation of the believer into union with God. One person defined it very simply: everyone who wants to love unconditionally is a mystic. (2)

We can look at the “mystic’s Hall of Fame” and come to the conclusion that we will never measure up to the Greats of the Faith, yet we have a lot in common with them: they and we are on a journey of seeking a closer relationship with God, of seeking transformation, and finding grace and to live to tell about it.

Christian writer Emilie Griffin suggests that “there are many quiet, unrecognized mystics, mystics who fly below the radar. They are close to God, transformed by that relationship, but may never look like ‘mystics’ in the eyes of others. In fact, being a mystic has little to do with visions or ecstasies. Instead, a mystic is a person far advanced in the spiritual life, one who very likely spends time in prayer and worship with disciplined regularity. Wouldn’t such a definition include a large number of people?” (3)

In that sense we are all mystics. We are mystics because we want, deep down, a close, intimate relationship with God that allows us to live life abundantly with and for others. To be a mystic is attainable for all of us. All we have to do is to take Paul’s words to heart and try to live into them each and every day.

Paul does not use the easiest of language when he speaks of being “strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit” (Eph. 3:16). People don’t talk like that anymore. But we’re in the realm of the mystical. When God’s love sustains us on our faith’s journey, something happens to us inside that can rarely be expressed in words.

And then he continues this line of thought, that “Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph. 3:17). This is also strange but beautiful language. We believe that Jesus Christ lived and died and rose again, but Paul

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goes beyond that here—he views the life of faith not simply as a matter of looking back to the life and ministry of Jesus, but as a matter of Christ living in our hearts in the here and now.

He also says this happens “as you are being rooted and grounded in love” (Eph. 3:17). He says that the life of faith is grounded in the experience of God’s love. And how do we experience God’s love? I think he answers that question in the next verse: “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all God’s, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:18-19). It’s “with all God’s people” that we come to know this love.

The idea is that it is in the community of faith that we experience the love of God. We enjoy this mysterious internal relationship with God as we support and encourage and love one another! Most of us who have pursued the life of faith have known people who communicated God’s love to us at various times in our lives. Sometimes that’s the only way we made it through a crisis. But it’s in those times when we really experience the life of faith at its best. That’s when, as St. Paul describes this life, we find ourselves “filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19).

In my life’s journey, it seems to me that there is nothing so “grounding” as the experience of being loved. Love is what enables us to go on living this difficult and sometimes confusing life of faith. Love is what enables us to go through the up’s and down’s and twists and turns of life with stability and serenity and strength. We may never understand fully what it means to live in faith, to live in this mysterious relationship with God, to be strengthened by internal resources granted by the Spirit of God, to be grounded in the love of God. But even if we don’t understand it fully, the experience of God’s love continues to give us the internal strength to believe what we have not seen. It gives us the strength to keep praying the prayers and listening for God to speak through the Word. And it keeps us grounded enough to go on serving others every day with peace, calm, kindness, and compassion.

Amen.

Sources:

1. www.bible.org; commentary to the epistle by Bob Deffinbaugh
2. www.wildthingsofGod/mysticism
3. Emilie Griffin, What is a mystic? www.baylor.edu