

**Claiming Our Identity**  
**Ephesians 3: 14-21**  
**Don Lincoln**

Several years ago, when visiting my parents in their apartment at the retirement community where they live in Akron, Ohio, I overheard them praying. Now, that may not seem to be an extraordinary thing, but I need to tell you, that it was an extraordinary experience for me. Not that they were praying. If you've heard me preach much, you know my parents are people of faith, who taught me much about the love of Jesus. Their praying should be no surprise. But let me tell you what happened.

My parents had said goodnight, gotten into bed, and turned out their light. I was in their living room down the hall working on my laptop. 15-20 minutes later, I saw my battery was getting low, so I tiptoed down the hall to the little bedroom where I stay when I visit (which is right next to my parents' room) to get my power cord. And that's when I heard it. My father's voice, low, and steady. He was praying. I paused.....and listened.

He was praying for one of my nieces – his granddaughter, who was pregnant. Now I don't know about you, but my grown up prayers aren't that different from my childhood prayers. "God bless mommy and daddy and Amy and Nancy and grandma and Tigger and my friend Timmy." Sort of the scatter-shot, name-everybody-who-comes-to-mind-before-you-go-to-sleep prayer.

But my father didn't just name my niece. He prayed for her pregnancy. Prayed for her child. Prayed for my niece's health, and her physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being in this journey. Prayed for her husband and his new job, and his traveling and that they would continue to be an encouragement to one other and care for each other in the times they were apart in this season. Prayed for the doctors who were caring for her. He prayed a couple minutes about her.

Then my dad shifted to the next person. And evidently the next one on his mental list was ME. It's a little odd eavesdropping on your parents' bedtime prayer, but almost embarrassing when the subject of the prayer is you. They prayed for me, and my health, and my ministry, and then – you know what – they prayed for you. For Westminster – and the ministry taking place in the life of this congregation, and our three services of worship every Sunday – that they would give glory and praise to God and that more and more people would come to know the love of Jesus Christ because of the work we do as a congregation.

**Today's text is that kind of prayer.** It is the personal, passionate, fervent prayer of Paul. But this prayer is INTENDED to be overheard.<sup>1</sup> It is prayed for the churches to whom Paul is writing – to those folks in Ephesus, and others – it was a circular letter – but also to any and every Christian who would read Paul's words. Paul had no idea how far this letter was going to go. Probably had no clue that it was going to come to you and me – generations later – this prayer, handed down for US!

All of these verses use the second person plural – not singular “you” but plural “you” – as in – “all y’all” in southern; or “youse” or “youse guys” in Philadelphian. It is an all-inclusive prayer, meant for US!

I mentioned in the first sermon in this series that most scholars consider the first three chapters of Ephesians to be about doctrine; and chapters four through six to be about ethics. Doctrine; and Christian living . But if you were here that Sunday, you may remember I said it the letter was hardly a dry theological treatise. The language virtually sings. True to form, this third chapter overflows.

Pastor Jon, in his sermon on chapter one said the text was one long, run-on sentence in the Greek – with no punctuation. Pastor Jon said it read sort of like a kid who just got home from a week at camp for his first time, who when asked about his week begins telling you about everything they did, leaping from one event to another with overflowing fervor and enthusiasm. They tell you all stuff they did in one, run-on overflow of how amazing the week was. Same with today’s lesson. One run-on sentence. Paul simply gushes.

I like how Paul starts out:

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father....”

I know we just the read the text, but if you actually thought about it, you might ask, “**WHAT** reason, Paul?” And you realize, it’s **ALL** the things Paul has been describing from the beginning of his letter. That the mystery of God’s plan has been made clear – that Gentiles have been heirs of the promise that they didn’t know was theirs. They are sharers in this good news of Jesus Christ – there are no longer insiders and outsiders anymore – the gift of God’s grace has been given to every family on earth, and God has blessed and empowered Paul, of all people, to share this good news.

Paul says it plainly, and with passion and wonder and awe in these first three chapters – there is **no nation, no clan, no family – no person** – who is beyond the love of God.

Now – that may seem an obvious claim to be made in a church on a Sunday morning – that no one is beyond the love of God. What else would you expect to hear? But I suspect the hard truth is, that may be difficult for some in this room to believe. Even on a sunny summer morning, the gathered people of this congregation bring together a myriad of secret hurts, private shames, and lost hopes.<sup>2</sup> Paul is speaking to you.

Paul is praying for you – you are a beloved child of God. **You. Are. Loved.**

Paul prays that you and I would be strengthened in our inner being, that Christ may dwell in our hearts – that Christ might take up residence in our hearts, that we would be rooted and grounded in His love.

Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of the Bible entitled “The Message” translates the next verses this way:

“And I ask God that with both feet planted firmly on love, you’ll be able to take in with all Christians the extravagant dimensions of Christ’s love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights!” This extravagant love is yours.

Paul cannot say it more fervently – more passionately – you are loved! Experience it. Savor it. Believe it!! It is for you – all of you – nobody is left out of this good news. Claim your identity – you are a beloved child of God! Paul mentions love more than a dozen times in this letter to the Ephesians! He's telling his readers, "It doesn't get any better than this!"

I am reminded of a story told by Father Gregory Boyle, and I'll warn you, the language in the story is a tad coarse, but I'm going to use it because he is quoting a young man he is visiting.

Father Greg, is a Jesuit priest who has served all over the world – Bolivia, prisons, and is founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, the largest gang intervention, rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world. He's been working with the gangs for decades. Father Greg, in his book, *Tattoos of the Heart*, tells a story about Rigo, a 15-year-old young man Father Greg is visiting in grownup prison. During their time together, Father Greg asks Rigo about his mother.

"That's her over there," Rigo points. "There's no one like her. I've been locked up for more than a year and a half. She comes to see me every Sunday. You know how many buses she takes every Sunday – to see my sorry ass?"

Rigo begins to sob fiercely, and when he gets his breath back, he struggles through tears: "Seven buses. She takes .....seven .....buses!"

Father Greg writes: "That's how to imagine the expansive heart of God — the One who takes as many buses as it takes, to get to us."

I started this sermon three different times this week – just couldn't get where I wanted to go. I knew there was something about the amazing, powerful, wonderful love of God that I wanted to express as I read and reread Paul's prayer for us. I struggled to find the words that would press beyond the Sunday school language of "Jesus loves me"<sup>3</sup> – that would convey the height, the depth, the width, the breadth of this amazing love of God.

And I finally settled on that opening about overhearing my father's prayer. But it wasn't the fact that I still heard him praying 20 minutes later when I walked back to the bedroom again, and realized the length and breadth and depth of the people and concerns my dad was lifting in prayer.....

It was when I heard my father say, "Lord, We love You SO MUCH, and we thank and praise You for the love You have given to us in Jesus Christ.

How else does one respond to a love that is higher and deeper and wider and longer, a love that knows no bounds, a love that is inexhaustible in its richness, never-failing, never-ceasing, never ending? One responds with the only words that make sense – thank you; and I love you too.

Some of you may remember pastor Joelle Beller – on staff here from 2004 – 2006, as director of children's ministry. Joelle was the first one on staff to invite the children at the children's time to repeat a prayer after her. I recall her saying one Sunday (*and I want you to pretend to be the children*):

**Dear Jesus... – "Dear Jesus..."**

**We love you so much! "We love you so much!"**

That's pretty intimate for Presbyterians!

I'll never forget those 35 children on the floor being invited to tell Jesus they love Him.

I remember when I was first engaging with early contemporary worship music, and the critics would say, “That music is all about Me and Jesus, and You and Jesus, and Jesus and Us.” And words like the “Lord Loves Me,” and “I Love You Lord” – a little too intimate and personal.....

It’s funny, none of those critics ever mentioned any problems with the old hymn... (singing....)

*My Jesus I love thee, I know thou art mine;  
For thee all the follies of sin I resign;  
My gracious redeemer, my Savior art thou,  
If ever I loved thee, my Jesus ‘tis now.*

Maybe because it says “thee” – it sounds more holy, and less intimate. ☺

Loved. And in love. It changes you. Rearranges your heart; your priorities. And it is THIS love – this wondrous, matchless love of God – this love of Jesus – that in turn causes you and me to want to love who **God loves** – ALL God’s children – the lost; the lonely; the gang member; the sour neighbor, the stranger, the outcast, the sibling that’s such a pain.....

.....but that’s the next three chapters of Ephesians!

“Thank You Lord, for Your love. Oh, and Lord – we love you so much!”

So much!! AMEN.

1. Sally Brown, WorkingPreacher.org, sermon on the text, July 29, 2012.
2. Edwin Searcy, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3, Commentary on “Ephesians 3: 14-21.
3. *ibid.*