

**Sermon Series: Transitions**

**“Rooted in Love, Sent out in Faith” by Laura Beach**

**Ephesians 3:14—21**

**BooneUMC**

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We’ve spent the last three weeks thinking about transitions, and what that means for us as individuals, as a church. Last week David reminded us that even in the midst of transition, we are here to worship a God who is madly in love with us. Today we’re exploring what it looks like to be rooted in that love of God, so that God’s love can overflow through us, to a world that is always, in a sense, in transition.

Let’s listen to God’s Word for us this morning, found in the words of this letter, this prayer for the Ephesians, beginning in 3:14.

*For this reason I kneel before the Father, <sup>15</sup>from whom every family<sup>[a]</sup> in heaven and on earth derives its name. <sup>16</sup>I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup>so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup>may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup>and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

*<sup>20</sup>Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

When you think of something being rooted, what comes to mind? Depending on where you are in life, and what you’ve been through, the idea of being rooted might sound like something you long for, or something that would hold you back.

Roots hold you firmly in place. So, for some, rootedness would seem the opposite of being free. It seems much of what our culture teaches us is that freedom is the ability to do whatever makes us happy, whatever our little hearts desire, without anyone or anything to constrain us. What we see on TV, and in advertising sends the message that this “freedom” should be our greatest goal. Ads for everything from sports cars to beer to deodorant imply that individual freedom will bring greatest fulfillment.

Think about the way that the world often looks at marriage. There’s a traditional image of the man losing his freedom, or perhaps in more modern outlooks, both individuals giving up all the

fun and free-spirited glamour of single life to be bound to another person, supposedly til death do them part.

But that's not the way that we, as Christians, view marriage. By committing to that one person... yes... you give up all the possibilities of others you could be with, and you give up some of your freedom to do whatever you want to do - you have another's wants and feelings to think about. But in return, you get an intimacy that grants acceptance and love greater than what you can share with any other person. Ideally, marriage is a relationship that not only allows, but helps you be free to live into who God created you to be, helping you be fully yourself, knowing that you'll be fully loved and accepted as you are.

Ironically, we might discover that greater freedom, the kind of freedom that really matters, comes with commitment, and the boundaries that commitment creates.

Several years ago, researchers studied the effects of physical boundaries on young children. They found that when children had a fenced in playground, they tended to play all the way to the edge. But when they didn't have that boundary, then they huddled in the middle, barely taking advantage of the vast field they'd been given.

Early in my call to ministry, I remember this idea of finding freedom in commitment being shared by a mentor and friend, the pastor who had been my supervisor in my first church internship.

There's something true about this with the church too, with agreeing to become Christ's bride. I know many who see this commitment to church as burden, a chain holding them back. In the first years when I was pastoring, I seemed determined to prove that though I had sermons to write and obligations to fulfill, I could still live life my own way—go on every adventure, make it to every music festival, concert and contra dance, even if it meant little sleep, I could still get it all done. Somewhere along the way, I began to more frequently choose the paths of service, even though it initially felt like sacrifice. And soon, as I became increasingly rooted and grounded in God, I found that it no longer felt like sacrifice.

Perhaps you have felt this, too—things that earlier in your Christian journey seemed so important to protect soon faded as your roots deepened and you found God's love pouring out of you.

In a world full of transition, Christ gives us a beautiful gift—an invitation to be rooted and established in love.

I love the way Eugene Peterson translated these verses we read from Ephesians in *The Message*:

*My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you’ll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ’s love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.*

*<sup>20-21</sup> God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.*

I wonder, how is God’s Spirit working within you calling you to live full lives, full in the fullness of God?

The fullness God calls us to is not fullness in the sense of full calendars, it’s not fullness that will fill our pockets and storehouses with riches. It is fullness that will come in knowing that Christ’s love is flowing out of us, as we are sent out in faith, no matter what the costs.

Many years ago, there was a missionary couple that was planning to move to China. They knew there was risk in this - risk even of their lives and the lives of their young children. As they prepared to go, friends and family would say, “Are you sure this is what is best for you and your kids?” And the couple would say, “We believe that what’s best for our children is not just making sure our children are safe and secure, living comfortable lives. We believe that following Jesus means there are some things worth taking risks for, that serving Christ is something we’d give up everything to do.” They were filled with the fullness of God, and couldn’t help but let that overflow, pouring out of them in service.

In Christ, we discover that we’re freed for joyful obedience, freed from fear, to trust in the power that has overcome evil and death.

How amazing that some of our youth and young adults in this church are leading the way in showing us what this means. I’m so thankful for the desire of these young people to serve. It’s taking them to Haiti, to inner city Nashville, to Ghana and Thailand, to South Africa and to South America. And in each of those places, they discover not only how God’s love overflows out of them as they go out in faith, but also how God can build them up in love and give them new-found strength as they experience God’s Spirit already at work in the places they go.

You may not be called to go across the globe for the sake of the gospel, giving up all comfort and security for you and your family, or you might be. Only you and God can know that. But, as I once heard a preacher say, “Christian life is about living your life in such a way that doesn't make sense unless the story of the Gospel is true.” (Stanley Hauerwas)

What is God calling you to do that the world would say just doesn't compute? I love the lines that Kentucky farmer and poet Wendell Berry writes in *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,  
vacation with pay. Want more  
of everything ready-made. Be afraid  
to know your neighbors and to die.  
And you will have a window in your head.  
Not even your future will be a mystery  
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card  
and shut away in a little drawer.  
When they want you to buy something  
they will call you. When they want you  
to die for profit they will let you know.

So, friends, every day do something  
that won't compute. Love the Lord.  
Love the world. Work for nothing.  
Take all that you have and be poor.  
Love someone who does not deserve it.

You know, being rooted in God's love allows us to live these lives that do not compute. Daily going to God in prayer, soaking ourselves in God's Word, opening our hearts to the Spirit's moving as we gather with Christ's body and hear testimony of God's work in the lives of others. These are ways in which we Christ gives us inner strength, the ways we take in all the extravagant dimensions of God's love, enabling us to love the Lord and the world.

During Apartheid in South Africa, where the white minority ruled and black majority were segregated and stripped of all privileges and rights, Bishop Desmond Tutu was a shining example of being so rooted in love that the Spirit just overflowed. One Easter Sunday, after he had been warned to stop speaking out against apartheid, soldiers were sent to his church. They lined the inside of the sanctuary, and stood with rifles loaded. The congregation was worried he would

speaking against apartheid, and the soldiers would start shooting. They were also worried that he would not speak out, and then the regime would have effectively won.

Now Desmond Tutu is not a very large man. He's fairly short, not terribly intimidating. But he had power beyond measure because he was rooted in God. There on that Sunday morning, before all those people and those men with guns, Bishop Tutu began bouncing up and down on his heels and laughing. Not just a giggle but a big, uncontrollable laugh, like a child. The laughter was contagious and soon everyone, even some of the soldiers, had joined in. In the midst of the laughter, Bishop Tutu cried out to the soldiers, "Little Brothers, you know that God is a God of justice, the God of the Exodus. You know that we are going to win. We don't want you to miss out on one moment of the celebration. Join us now! The party wouldn't be complete without you." He went on to preach against apartheid that morning, and he was not shot.

His power was not the power of force, or wealth, or numbers. He had the power that comes from being rooted in love, in the faith that gave him the capacity for joy and hope of God's kingdom breaking in here and now. That rootedness allowed him the freedom to not be held in bondage to the power of the men with the guns, the freedom to look past them and to let the grace and love of God overflow from within him to all those gathered, even those who were there with orders to kill him.<sup>1</sup>

Just like laughter, this Holy Spirit power, what Alexia Salvatierra calls "dove power" is contagious. And sometimes it just takes hearing a witness of that power working in another's life for us to know that the power can work within us too.

Dorothy Day helped start the Catholic Worker movement back in the early 1930s, setting up houses of hospitality, places that showed mercy to the poor and those on the margins. Once she was touring a mental hospital and was told about a man who lived alone in a padded room because of his violent impulses. She insisted that they let her go and visit him. When she entered the room, she just stood there, with her hand outstretched. He would alternately lunge towards her, screaming, then fall back shaking in terror. The guards at the door were ready to run in and keep him from hurting her, but he never actually hit her, and she was signaling for them to stay out with her other hand. Eventually, as he continued to pace in circles around her, he grew calmer, until eventually he came up to her, slipping his arm under hers, in an embrace, and she held him for a long time while he wept.

Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, who first shared that story with me, said she first heard it when she herself was working at a Catholic Worker house. She worked with many who were homeless and

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<sup>1</sup> I heard this story told by Alexia Salvatierra at the Wild Goose Festival "Faith-Rooted Organizing: Dove Power" workshop, July 12, 2015. The way I have told it is adapted from memory of her telling as well as her written version found in *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World* By Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, Peter Heltzel, p. 75.

who lived with mental illness. Not long after hearing that story, Alexia was at work when a man from the streets named Gypsy came in. She had known Gypsy for quite some time. He had a sweet spirit and good sense of humor. When he was out on the streets, he used to panhandle, and he'd stand on his head with his hat out, and ask folks for money "to help him get back on his feet" He was always bringing a smile to people's faces.

Well this particular day, Gypsy was not in good spirits. He asked to speak to Alexia privately, and as soon as she invited him into her office and closed the door, he pulled out a gun and said he was going to kill his wife because she had cheated on him. Alexia was in a panic. But, being deeply rooted in Christ's love, and thinking of that story of Dorothy Day, she began to speak, and God's love began to pour out of her. She reminded Gypsy of how much he was loved by everyone who knew him, and reminded him of all that they loved about him. She spoke of the little flame of love that was within him. She told him that if he went through with killing his wife, that little flame would be snuffed out. Soon, he handed her the gun, and she put it in the drawer and comforted him as he wept.<sup>2</sup>

Of course not all such stories have such positive outcomes. The risks are real, and in the moment, evil often seems to be winning the battle.

But, as Bishop Tutu said to those soldiers that day: God is a God of justice! God did not keep Jesus from suffering on the cross, but God did turn tears into joy on that third day when he defeated death and was raised from the dead. God does not stop every evil thing from happening, but God weaves all our deepest pains and greatest joys in to a tapestry so beautiful, it is beyond compare...and God can do abundantly immeasurably more than we can even ask or imagine.

But God, who has the power to raise from the dead and turn enemies into friends, this God we call Father and Lord, chooses to make that power known in the world through the likes of you and you and you and you and me. God chooses to work through us, unlikely and imperfect vessels. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2:10, "*We are God's accomplishment, created in Christ to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way we live our lives.*"

So, as you root yourself in God's love, what is Christ's spirit within you calling you to do? What situation or person might God be waiting to use you to be a channel of mercy or love towards? Whatever it is that came to mind just now, you can be assured that as you root yourselves in God's love, God's power and grace will overflow from you to do abundantly more than you could ask or imagine. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.