

A few years ago we attended a production at Texas Tech of Arthur Miller's classic American play, "*The Death of a Salesman*." The play is now 66 years old, and just as depressing as ever.

The protagonist, Willy Loman is a failure in business and a failure in his personal relationships, especially with his two sons. At one point, Willie is talking in his imagination to his estranged brother, Ben, talking about their absent father. Willy says,

"Dad left when I was such a baby and I never had a chance to talk with him, and I still feel kind of temporary about myself."

I still feel kind of temporary about myself. I think there's a lot of that feeling in 21st century American society. We feel temporary.

What is enduring? What can we hold on to? The world is changing around us at an exponential rate. Is there anything of permanence that we can rely on?

On top of that, many people feel about God the same way that Willy Loman feels about his father. Willy feels temporary about himself because his father abandoned him. Many in our society see God at best as an absent father, or at worst, as a childhood fairy tale. Either way, God is not there for them to offer any sense of stability in their lives.

It just so happens that our Epistle readings for the next 5 weeks deal with these same themes. Actually, it's 7 weeks, but I wasn't here the last 2 weeks, so we've got 5 readings to go. And these readings are from the Epistle to the Ephesians.

Ephesians still generates a fair amount of controversy over its authorship, whether it was written by Paul himself or by one of his followers.

But this doesn't really matter to me. Paul was the head of a missionary organization with about 40 people who are named in the New Testament, and who knows how many others who remain nameless.

He probably shared some of his writing tasks with them. In fact, one of my favorite scholars has said, "Paul may have authored all of his epistles, and may have written none of them."¹

But whether Paul or one of his followers wrote Ephesians, the message is of vital importance to its original audience. One scholar describes the original recipients this way:

"Their main problems are powerlessness, instability, and a lack of resolve, and these are related to an insufficient sense of identity."²

Powerlessness. Instability. Lack of resolve. Stemming from an insufficient sense of identity. Sounds a lot like our society. Not being grounded. Feeling temporary.

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Apostle Paul*

² Andrew Lincoln, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters*

So I believe Ephesians has important things to say to us, and we'll explore some of those themes in coming weeks.

But today's lesson begins by looking backwards. The first words of our lesson today from Ephesians 3 are, "For this reason..."

For what reason?

Well, we have to look back. To really get a firm answer we have to look back to ch2. These are from the Epistle lesson from last Sunday. These words talk about Jesus Christ breaking down divisions, in this specific case, divisions between Jews and non-Jews.

Paul says, "(Jesus) has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it."

In other words, Jesus makes peace, Jesus offers reconciliation, Jesus brings together two estranged groups and makes them one through the blood of his cross.

Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

So Paul begins today, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name."

Paul is saying, since we can find unity through Jesus' cross, we can become children of God. And if we become children of God together, that makes us part of the one human family. For this reason, Paul says, he kneels in prayer and thanksgiving.

And then he continues to pray for his hearers. It's relatively long--4 verses. But it's an important prayer. The first 2 verses say,

"I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, God 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."

A number of important things here. First off, we are not abandoned, we are not without a sense of identity. We are God's children. Paul prays that God may strengthen our inner being through the Holy Spirit, and that Christ may have a dwelling place in our hearts.

Unlike Willy Loman, we are not temporary, and we're not orphans. God is there for us.

The next thing Paul says is that he prays that we be rooted and grounded in that love. If things are changing exponentially all around you, if you're not sure if there's anything permanent to hold on to, then Paul is saying, sink your roots deep into this: God's love for you. Root yourself in that truth. Ground yourself in that truth.

And then Paul has a couple of important and wonderful verbs: comprehend, and know.

"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."

Comprehend, and know.

Comprehend--wrap your mind around this reality--get the full picture in mind. "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth (of God's love)."

Start to really wrap your mind around the stunning reality of how much God loves you and how much God has done for you. Try to get ahold of it up here (in your mind).

But then also do something about it down here (in your heart). 'Yes, I want you to comprehend in your head,' Paul is saying. 'But I also pray that you know...' Know what?

"... know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

To know God's love which surpasses knowledge. Paul wants us to really know that which is beyond knowing. As one writer says,

"The prayer simply and compellingly invites us to realize how much God loves us--to experience God's surrounding, encompassing, and holding us with love. And it promises us that God will fill us when we are empty, make us strong when we are weak, and keep us rooted and grounded when everything is changing."³

What is enduring? What can we hold on to?

Paul says be rooted in God, be rooted and grounded in God's love.

Feeling powerless? Remember, Paul says, that God's power can do far more than you can ask or imagine.

Not sure who you are? Then know who your Father is. Comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of his love.

Know his love, know that which surpasses knowledge. And be filled with the fullness of God.

³ Guy Sales, *Our Vast and Loving God*