

The Sixteenth Sunday in Trinity

Paul S. Russell

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...the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. (*Ephesians* 3:14–19)

There are a number of connected ideas in this small piece of today's Epistle lesson. It is easy to miss the train of St. Paul's thought, here, but, if we can see it clearly, we can learn much about how he brought together the various elements of Christian Thought. I know that many people think that knowing Theology is not really important because *religious life* is lived out in *daily life*, but I think that having a clear sense of what it is you are trying to do and how its pieces fit together is a real, *practical* help. I will try to show you a little bit of how this could work this morning. I hope to show you that Theology does matter for religious life.

St. Paul begins with the idea that God is the true source of reality and identity. This is what it means to say that it is *God the Father* "of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named". If we are named by our connection to "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" then He is the source of our identity (since names, in ancient culture, were determinants of reality, not just labels that could be arbitrarily attached to things). More than just being the source of *who* we are, God the Father is the hub around which our lives are lived. If we are named by our connection to Him, other creatures recognize us and identify us according to our connection to Him and we can only find a true fulfillment of our natures by living out that connection fully and successfully.

Fortunately for us, God, the source of our being, is a glorious Being, so His glory will strengthen us by sending His Spirit to live in our "inner man" and sending His Son to live in our hearts. This double connection of indwelling by both Spirit and Son will tie us to God the Father so strongly that it will have very extravagant results. (Having the Son and Spirit inside you is a tremendous thing, after all.)

St. Paul, who never shies away from making his point as strongly as possible, lays out these results at length.

- We will be "rooted and grounded in love" (which is to say, in the nature of God, Himself).

- We will be able to know what all those closely tied to God (that is, the saints) know: the depth and breadth and length and height.
- We will be filled with “all the fulness of God”.

Well, if we are “rooted and grounded in love” that means that we are living in a way that maximizes our likeness to God, Who is love.¹ We are as much like God as our nature allows us to be. Because of this closeness to God, we can know what all the saints know: “the depth and breadth and length and height”. What does this mean?

- Marius Victorinus (a philosopher who converted to Christianity in the middle 300s) thinks these are the dimensions of grace and that knowing them means we know how great God’s grace is.
- Ambrosiaster (an unknown author of the late 300s) thinks that these four dimensions stand for the perfection of God in the way that a sphere, which has the same dimensions in all of these directions, is a perfect shape.
- Jerome († 419) thinks they represent the total of all created reality.
- Gregory of Nyssa († after 394) thinks that the dimensions stand for the four arms of the Cross and indicate knowledge of the true worship of the Cross, which all the saints know.

From that selection of possibilities, we can see that the saints’ knowledge is understood to be knowledge that is necessary for a human existence that is fully and intelligently engaged with the world. The first conviction under-lying all these suggestions is that human beings cannot live properly if they dwell in ignorance. Only real knowledge can give us the tools to live in the world as we ought to live. Notice, again, that this state of full knowledge is the state that is granted to “the saints”. Christians are the ones who are grappling with human life and its troubles in the most fully developed way among human beings.

This catalogue of the effects of being named by our connection to God the Father culminates in our “know[ing] the love of Christ”. If we know Christ’s love, we will “be filled with all the fulness of God”.

I take “know[ing] the love of Christ” to be meant in a double way here. I think that St. Paul means both that we will *be aware of* how much Christ loves us and that we will have *the experience* of Him loving us. Both our intellects and our hearts will be engaged in this double connection to Christ’s love and that double connection will catch all of our natures up in a relationship with Christ’s love. I think that picture of full involvement is the best suggestion for what St. Paul is laying out for his hearers as the ideal state of Christian life.

The reason we can be sure that this is one way that St. Paul understood the Christian ideal is that it ends with his saying:

... that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.

¹1 John 4:8

The state of being filled as full of God's fullness as possible describes the existence that is as close to God as is possible for a human being. It describes the fullest living out of the image and likeness of God in us that we can attain in this life. What did St. Paul think the full Christian life entails?

- Having the strength of the Spirit within us
- Having Christ dwell in our hearts
- Being rooted in love
- Comprehending "what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height"
- Knowing the love of Christ

All of these things end with us being filled with God's fullness, which is the real point.

The more like God we are, the more like our best selves we become. The more we are rooted in love and strengthened in the Spirit, the more we can grow to be the fullest and most developed versions of our selves.

In the end, the call to live holy lives is a call to live in touch with God, in a way that draws strength from His presence and extends His actions and desires. If we can attain this state in which we are living in tune with God and His nature, we will be not only more like *Him*, but also more like our best selves. The irony of this is that we do not lose ourselves by likening ourselves to God; instead, we *gain* our real selves. As Jesus said:²

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.

We save our lives because we draw our life not from ourselves but from God, from Whom we originally received it. Life comes from God and our lives are more vibrant and complete the closer to God we live them. That is what the saints know, St. Paul teaches us, and we ought to hope to learn it better, ourselves, by living lives in closer contact with God as we grow to be better versions of ourselves.

²Mark 8:35