

ME

from me to we

WE

Is life all about Me? A Me lifestyle is about the isolated individual—my ideas, my agenda, my concerns alone. From this vantage point, life is about making Me the best I can be. But faith in Jesus Christ draws us into We, where there is a relationship with God and others. We means setting our opinions aside and submitting in faith to Jesus Christ. We means being part of a family—a community of faith, united across racial and social lines. Journey with us from Me to We as we study the book of Ephesians this summer.

FROM ME TO WE • EPHESIANS 3:14-21 • Jennifer Holz • July 8, 2018

Today we get a glimpse into Paul's prayer life. Open your Bibles to Ephesians 3:14-21. "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 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, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. 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, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

When I was in seminary in California, I worked as a mediator for a small Mennonite organization called The Center for Conflict Resolution. My job was to help people coming to small claims court resolve their conflicts face to face rather than through a judge.

As you can imagine, all kinds of conflicts showed up there. I remember the case of somebody's leaves dropping over the fence onto their neighbor's property and the neighbor was angry they weren't fixing the problem. So, the neighbor forced him into court. Makes sense, I suppose—if you don't like talking to your neighbor. Sometimes, payments were missed and the only way to get a response was to go to court. I can understand that. A small business was breaking up and the two friends who started it couldn't figure out how to split things because feelings had been badly hurt—over a girl they both wanted to date. That one was tough. Sometimes it came down to offering an apology. Sometimes money exchanged hands. Sometimes we came up with a creative agreement that helped us get to a resolution.

How do you help two people on opposite sides of a conflict come to a place of resolution? How do you help people who are usually pointing fingers, dealing with anger, hurt feelings, injured pride and very real challenges, find reconciliation?

Well, each morning I walked into the court room with a bit of nervous adrenaline never knowing what conflicts I would step into that day. I would quietly pray, "Lord, I know you can find a path through these messy situations, but I'm pretty sure on my own, I can't. I need your help." I knew that if God wasn't in it, we wouldn't get far.

You see God is the author, expert and the implementer of reconciliation. God is committed to the reconciliation process. The church as a body of reconciled people is God's idea, God's masterpiece, and God will see His church through. So, when Paul tells the Ephesian church that he is praying for them, it's really a game-changing moment. Paul has just announced in this beautiful letter what God is doing among them. He has made one new humanity out of two groups who were once divided, far off from each other and in conflict. The Jews and the Gentiles have been reconciled in Jesus. He has made them alive in Christ and broken down the walls that divided them. God, the master of new life, forgiveness and unity has brought the most unlikely people together and made them brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the church.

This is us. The amazing news is that Jesus has done the work—the two have become one in Christ. But now the Ephesian church must live it. As the late Spencer Perkins, author of the book *More than Equals*, said, "The dividing wall has been torn down, but we still have to step over the rubble."

Unity is hard work. It will take every skill, every ounce of faith and every bit of courage we have to engage in the true reconciling work of Jesus: to live in unity as His church and be the dwelling place of God in the world! And so in a time like today, when division is heightened, hatred is real, nobody seems to get along or even want to get along, I think it is with sheer relief that we get to this section of Paul's letter, and we read:

"For this reason, I kneel before the Father (vs. 14)." *I am praying for you*, Paul says. *I am on my knees before the one who has created this new family*. Paul knows the Ephesian church will need more than good will and a "try really hard" strategy to live in unity. Loving neighbors is difficult work. And we dare not try it apart from the love of God.

The church finds her life in a different place than the world. The church dips into a different pool of love than the world. In prayer we acknowledge that our life comes from God. And that only in Him is the church possible. Prayer is an act of faith. In prayer we declare our dependence on God. Prayer is our acknowledgement that we need help. Prayer is part of our work—and given where Paul's prayer comes in this letter, I would say prayer is our *first* work.

Theologians tell us that most prayer in Paul's time was done in a standing position—so for Paul to kneel in this moment reflects something really important: an earnestness, a humility, a submission, a vulnerability before God, an acknowledgement that if God doesn't show up, we are lost.

Paul prays for the church that the Spirit would strengthen them and reveal to them the greatness of God's love. Paul prays that they would grow deep roots in the love of Christ. He prays that they would be established in love. He prays that they would be filled with the fullness of God. He prays that they would be *rooted, established* and *filled*.

On any given day—our lives can feel unanchored, thin, near the breaking point or simply tossed around by the latest circumstances. Paul prays that the church would be rooted in Christ, anchored in the Spirit and filled with the presence of the Father.

Three images help Paul convey this anchoring work of prayer. I invite you to open your imaginations and let one of these images work on your heart today. I'm praying one of these pictures will lodge in your heart today—that you will carry it with you and that image will prompt you to pray for your own life in Christ and for our life together as a church.

First, Paul prays that the church would be rooted in love. Picture a tree rooted by streams of water. It's bearing fruit in its time and growing strong and majestic. We often don't see the roots of a great tree. But, here the earth has pulled back to give us a glimpse of the tree's life underneath the surface. Roots grow down into the earth to take in water and nutrients. And they fix a tree to the ground—enabling the tree to stand tall and to flourish. As the tree grows, so the roots go deeper.

Picture a tree that you know. Maybe it's in your yard, maybe it's downtown, maybe it's a tree you encountered somewhere else in your life. But it's big. It's strong. It's beautiful. God is

planting you deep within the love of Christ like this tree.

When our church kids go to Camp Elim, they learn to have a quiet time of reading and praying through what Danny and the staff call "Quiet Tree." They each find a tree on the property that becomes their tree for the week. Each morning they go sit by their tree and they open the Word of God, read it and pray. I love this. Paul would love this. It helps to have a specific place to pray.

In Psalm 1 we read of the one who delights in the Word of the Lord is "like a tree planted by streams of water, giving its fruit in season." When Jesus was explaining His parable of the sower in Mark 4, only one out of four handfuls of seeds flourish where they are scattered. Jesus talks about the seed that grows no roots. It springs up quickly, but when the sun comes up it is scorched and withers for it has no root.

The prophet Jeremiah paints a word picture of the one who doesn't trust God, but draws strength in the things of man "That person will be like a bush in the wasteland... dwelling in the parched places of the desert in a salt land where no one lives" (Jeremiah 17:6). Don't let that be you!

But Jeremiah goes on, "blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit" (Jeremiah 17:7-8). Imagine your life like a flourishing tree—rooted and growing in Christ.

Prayer nurtures the unseen work that allows our roots to sink into Christ. In prayer, we become receptive to the will of God. In prayer, we become open to what God is doing in our lives and in our life together. Paul prays for the church to be like a tree flourishing, bearing fruit, rooted deeply in the places where it finds health and nourishment. Find your quiet tree, your quiet place, and in prayer ask God to plant you in Him, and be encouraged that Jesus is rooting your life in His love.

Paul also prays for the church to be established in the love of Christ. The image now shifts to the laying of a solid foundation. We are reminded of the man who built his house on sand: the waves came and the storm brewed, and the house was swept away. But the man who built his house on a rock—the waves came and the storm brewed, but the house stood firm. It was established. Image two is a house built on a firm foundation.

How are we to weather the storms around us? How do we avoid being tossed to and fro by the next frenzied Facebook post that shows up in our feed? Or by the next flip-pant comment made to you about your inadequacies? How do we put our hope in the strong work of Jesus? Paul prays that the church would be established in the love of Christ.

Our church is 145 years old, and I'm confident that those who built these buildings made sure we had a strong foundation laid beneath. Our prayer is that we, First Presbyterian Church (the gathered body of Christ) would be established in the Word of God and that we would rest upon the cornerstone of Jesus Christ who gave His life that we might live. As we pray for the church (yes, ours and the whole church of Jesus) let's pray that our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ.

It may be as simple as the Three Little Pigs. I think children's stories can really help us here. The pig with the brick house is the one who not only withstands the breath of the wolf, but shelters his brother pigs as well. It takes longer to

build, it takes more work, it takes the discipline of planning out—but the foundation is secure. Be the third pig!

The psalmist prays, "The Lord makes firm [or establishes] the steps of the one who delights in him" (Psalm 37:23). How does one delight in the Lord? Can prayer be a delight? And can joy in the Lord produce a strong foundation?

Henri Nouwen writes in *Spiritual Formation* that to pray is "to waste time with God." "Prayer is being unbusy with God instead of busy with other things." The world calls us to make good use of our time. Jesus calls us to spend useless time with Him, writes Nouwen. "Come to me, and I will give you rest," says Jesus (Matthew 11:28). Nouwen says, "In prayer, we aren't producing, we aren't proving our worth, we aren't striving to present perfection." In prayer we discover the Lord enjoys us. He loves you. He wants to spend time with you. The love of Jesus becomes a rock of stability in our lives.

If you find that you can more easily access your grumpy pants place when you are serving others, check your calendar. When was the last time you made an appointment to enjoy God in prayer? Get out your calendar and figure out when you will waste time with God this week.

Finally, Paul prays that the church would be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Image three is a waterfall. The Greek word here is *pleroma*. The word means fullness, like a waterfall fills the pond below it, or a rushing river that flows by—always filling; always full. Paul prays that the church would be filled with the fullness of God. In prayer, we are immersed in the ever-flowing stream of the community of Father, Son and Spirit, a triune relationship of abundance and self-giving love. Other streams and rivers that we plunge into will eventually run out or dry up. But the river of God will never be empty. Such overflow is beyond our imaginations.

Psalm 16:11: "You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."

My family is a water family. We love to swim, we love the ocean, we love being in water. Last week, I spent the entire day at Waterworld with our kids, and when we got home around 5 p.m., we stopped at home to grab a snack and then head to our pool, which happened to be open until 9 p.m. that night. There is something about being immersed in water. I know not everyone loves to swim, but there is something magnificent about water. When God created the waters, the seas, the oceans and filled them with living creatures, He made them vast and incomprehensible. There are depths of His world of water that we as human beings haven't yet been able to explore. There are creatures we haven't yet discovered. There are mysteries of the deep that keep our imaginations open and full of wonder. Isaiah writes that one day the earth will "be full of the knowledge of the Lord like the waters cover the seas" (Isaiah 11:9).

Every morning around 6 a.m. from May to September, the sprinklers come on in the big school field behind our house. And every morning a little bulldog shows up with his owner and the other dogs in his family to play in the sprinklers. And this little bulldog sprints every morning to mash his face full force right into the stream of water coming out of the sprinkler head. With his little legs he runs from sprinkler to sprinkler shoving his face in. It must be his favorite thing of the day. It's hilarious to watch and it's our breakfast entertainment. Eventually the owner has

to pull little Fifi away to finish their walk. But I think, that's it! That's the picture of prayer—sheer enjoyment of the gushing water of God's fullness in our faces!

When you swim, shower, bathe, drink a glass of ice water, stand in the rain, take your dog for a walk in the sprinklers, stare at the ocean—pray for the Lord to drench you with His joy and fill you with His presence. Paul prays for the church to be filled by the overflowing waterfall of God's grace and love.

A short aside here about prayer. Some find it very easy to pray. Others find it more difficult to form the words. That's okay. If you can't find the words, use the words of others. The Lord's Prayer (which we pray each week) is a great place to start. Or open the book of Psalms—it is the ancient prayer book of the Bible. Pray a psalm to the Lord. The prayers of the people of God are plentiful, they flow forth like a rushing river. Like a sprinkler in the park, put your face in and experience the overflow of God's love.

So, I leave you with this three images: a tree, a house, a waterfall. Rooted, established and filled. Which image will you take with you today? Which picture invites you to prayer? Where is your place? When is your time? How will you enjoy time with the Lord?

When my husband, Adam, was rediscovering his faith in college at the University of Iowa, a friend of his got the Christian guys together in his dorm at the beginning of the school year and suggested they get together every night at 10:00 p.m. to pray together for the first two weeks of school. He wanted them to get the year started off right. Adam's first thought, was, "Right, like that's gonna happen!" But they agreed to do it. And so at 10:00 every night they gathered to pray. Two weeks turned into two years. For the next two years, somebody (not always all of them) showed up every night at 10:00 to pray. Can you imagine the rootedness of love, the foundation of love and the filling up of love that happened over that time? Adam so desperately needed that practice, but he couldn't have imagined it for even a second. But one day at a time they met together with the Lord: a place, a time, and a group of guys to help one another "waste precious time" with God. As a wife, I am so grateful for the foundation of prayer that has been fixed in my husband's life. I can't imagine a better gift to give a spouse.

As I close us in prayer, one last quick note on this passage: Paul prays that the Ephesian church together with all God's people would be able to grasp how high, wide, long and deep is the love of Christ. How do we grab on to God' love? Paul indicates it takes a community. From me to we! We need each other. In prayer we hold one another up before the Lord in faith, and in community we offer our prayers together to the one who is able to do immeasurably more than all we could ask or imagine. So, I close with Paul's final words as he finishes this prayer:

"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, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

STUDY GUIDE

FROM ME TO WE • EPHESIANS 3:14-21

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read the passage for the week: Ephesians 3:14-21. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note words or phrases that seem meaningful. Pray for your study of God's Word.

- Looking back over the first couple chapters of Ephesians, for what reason is Paul moved to pray for the Ephesians? "For this reason..." (verse 14).
- According to the passage, what does God's power bring in our lives? What difference does this make?
- Re-read verses 17 and 18. What does it mean to be rooted and established in love? Who do you know models this? What do you notice about their life?
- Re-read verse 19. In your own words, what is this verse saying?
- What encouragement does verse 20 bring? Where in your life right now do you need this encouragement?
- Paul is moved to pray for the Ephesians. What moves you to pray?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

How can you bless those around you this month? Brainstorm some possible ideas and pick one to do.

IN: Connect With the Family of God

Use Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 to pray for our church.