

## **Rooted and Grounded in Love**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Jesus fed 5,000 people.

Our Lord fed 5,000 people on a dusty hillside, one warm day many centuries ago.

Jesus had just crossed the Sea of Galilee with the disciples. A vast multitude followed: some desperate for healing, others curious to see this miracle-worker, still others impelled by a longing they couldn't explain. *Thousands* of people, all of them eager and tired and hungry! The disciples were overwhelmed. Five barley loaves and two small fish—what good would those meager resources do? But then, a luminous moment: Jesus raised his hands to heaven, giving thanks—time seemed to shimmer to a halt—and abundance spilled into the hands of the disciples. The air was filled with the aroma of fresh bread and the tang of salted fish. Loaf after loaf broken and shared! Pieces of fish put into every outstretched hand! Birds would have swooped in for smaller pieces; insects would have feasted on crumbs in the grass. Abundance far beyond the need. A prophetic sign:<sup>1</sup> food for the whole world!

It's impossible to say *how* it happened. After twelve baskets of pieces were collected to take back to the poor, after everyone had set off for home, the disciples would have tried to figure it out. "The basket was empty, then all of a sudden it got heavy—fish were piled to the rim!" "I didn't even have a basket—

every time I reached out to someone, bread was in my hand!” We may imagine joyous laughter, and murmurs of wonder, and quizzical glances at the One who had given thanks. They’d all been at the wedding in Cana when the wine materialized inside six huge stone jars. They’d seen his power then,<sup>2</sup> and there had been healings too. But this was something else. They’d been *right there* and they still had no idea what had happened. A wonderful mystery.

Centuries ago, on a warm day just like today, Jesus fed 5,000 people.

Abundance beyond the telling.

The joy on that Galilean hillside must have been indescribable.

But what about *now*?, you may ask.

Where’s that abundance *now*, in this global age of famine and fear?

Where are *our* miracles?

Things seem different now, don’t they?

But come to think of it, things were different even then—within one generation of Christ having been raised from the dead and ascending into heaven. “What about now?” was *the* urgent question for Paul and others in the early Church.

Time is too short for us to survey all of the ways in which Christian theologians have responded to that question, “What about now?” But we can spend a moment on the beautiful Letter to the Ephesians. Ephesians can help us think about the

mystery of God's grace in Christ<sup>3</sup> and how we can know abundance beyond the telling even now.

Ephesians 1 tells us that God has *lavished grace* upon us in Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Ephesians 2 tells us that *Christ is our peace*.<sup>5</sup>

This morning, Ephesians 3 tells us that in Christ, we are being *rooted and grounded in love*. The author of Ephesians falls to his knees, imploring God that believers may come “to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,” that we may comprehend the “breadth and length and height and depth” of that invincible love, so that we “may be filled with all the fullness of God.”<sup>6</sup>

Beautiful theology—but, admittedly, not easy to understand.

How can we come to *know* the love of Christ when it surpasses *knowledge*?

What on earth does it mean to be “filled with all the fullness of God”?

I'd love to say, “Over to you, David Kelsey”—world-renowned theologian, sitting right over there—but I'll content myself with this: theologians have pondered these questions for lifetimes.<sup>7</sup>

We can start here: knowing Christ means knowing *we are loved* and *we are called to reach out in love*. Love is a central theme of Ephesians; it comes up over and over again.<sup>8</sup> As we become more deeply rooted and grounded in love, the Holy Spirit strengthens us and moves us ever closer to the God Who is love. In the *love*

*of Christ* all things are possible, even when the material at hand seems meager or insufficient—like five loaves and two fish on a hillside in ancient Galilee.

This summer I have something new and very fun in my life: I've joined a book group. We have seven members, all women, ranging in age from mid-forties to mid-seventies. We rotate who chooses the novel, and every five weeks, we get together for a light supper and discuss the book. We love thinking about the characters, the drama that unfolds in each plot, and the unique perspective that each novelist has on life. We're always on tenterhooks to learn what the next book will be. We just can't wait to get together!

What we read is *changing us*. Each novel spurs us to reflect on history or another culture, a family's struggles and joys, or some aspect of living that we had never considered before. Our imaginations are opened to new possibilities. Now, I believe the Holy Spirit is at work generating insight and healing and wisdom in *every* place where two or three are gathered with hearts open to transformation. The Holy Spirit is at work in your knitting group and in your child's classroom and in your A.A. meeting, prompting us to speak our truths and teaching us how to hear one another: grounding us in love. So, book group: I want to tell you about two novels that have helped me to understand what it means to be *grounded in love*.

Our first book was *A Gentleman in Moscow*,<sup>9</sup> about a young Russian aristocrat, Alexander Rostov, who's sentenced to life imprisonment in the Hotel Metropol in Moscow when the Bolsheviks come to power. He's grateful it's not a labor camp in bitterly cold Siberia, where millions would suffer and die. But Alexander's confinement and alienation are real. He has to make his home in two tiny rooms for the rest of his life—he's 30 when he is sentenced—and he'll be shot if he steps outside the doors of the hotel. Yet he *builds community*, fostering relationships with the staff and other guests, cultivating joy right where he is. The world that unfolds inside the hotel is captivating. There are secret compartments and hidden rooms, blossoming friendships and fierce rivalries, gift-giving and passion and a daring escape. There are locked doors, deprivations and humiliations, and armed Bolsheviks guarding the exits—but it's *marvelous* how Alexander creates a rich life of love and sacrifice within the walls that imprison him.<sup>10</sup> *Rooted and grounded in love*, no matter where you are, no matter how restricted your life is: this novel shows us what love can mean.

This month, we're reading *The Art of Hearing Heartbeats*.<sup>11</sup> This 2006 novel is set in Burma; in it, we meet a Burmese child named Tin Win who has been abandoned by his mother. When she leaves him, the six-year-old sits on a stump in a field, watching for seven days through heat and cold, but she never comes back. Straining to glimpse his mother in the distance, little Tin Win notices his vision starting to blur and dim. Over time, he becomes totally blind.

At first, this physical challenge seems insurmountable. The boy struggles with rage and shame; he's utterly isolated. Then he learns to *listen*. Through spiritual training at the local monastery, Tin Win learns to hear "the true nature of things."<sup>12</sup> He hears "a beetle crawling across a roof"; he can detect "a breath of wind in the courtyard [lifting] grains of sand into the air and [setting] them down again."<sup>13</sup> He can hear snakes sleeping underground and identify the sound made by the wings of a swallowtail butterfly.<sup>14</sup> He starts hearing heartbeats: the "soft knocking" of the heart of a new friend, Mi Mi, the heartbeat of a baby bird not yet hatched from its egg, and then "a perpetual thrumming on all sides.... all the hearts of passersby."<sup>15</sup> Connected to the sounds coming from all sides, Tin Win no longer feels "like a stranger in his own life."<sup>16</sup> He becomes *rooted and grounded in love* by paying deep attention to the living going on all around him.

- A prisoner creating community over decades of confinement.
- A boy learning to hear the heartbeat of life itself.

Such miracles wouldn't make headlines; they'd go unremarked by social media.

But that's okay. As one theologian has said, "the status quo of society is not the pulse of the church."<sup>17</sup> *We know* the pulse of the Church is the Holy Spirit, who strengthens every believer and every group for the work of transformation, impelling us onward into the fullness of God's love.

In the Name of the One who is Life and Love<sup>18</sup> and Abundance beyond the telling: Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever.

Amen.

Carolyn J. Sharp

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Proper 12B

2 Sam 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Eph 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

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<sup>1</sup> “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world’” (John 6:14). Often in John, believers begin to understand something about Jesus rightly on one level, while not grasping the deeper theological significance. In this instance, the deeper truth is that Jesus himself embodies the ceaseless abundance of God (“I am the bread of life,” 6:35) rather than simply working a prophetic sign.

<sup>2</sup> “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (John 2:11).

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 1:6.

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 1:6-8.

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 2:14.

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 3:18-19. There is scholarly debate about the ambiguous Greek syntax here, especially re: which referent is being modified by “breadth and length and height and depth.”

<sup>7</sup> If you're interested in classical explorations of Ephesians, here are two resources: John Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians* (orig. French edition published in 1562; this edition based on Arthur Golding's translation, revised; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2017); Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (translated by Ross M. Wright; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

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<sup>8</sup> The noun ἀγάπη, “love,” occurs in Eph 1:4, 15; 2:4; 3:17, 19; 4:2, 15, 16; 5:2; 6:23. Forms of the verb ἀγαπάω, “to love,” occur in Eph 1:6 (in a participial form unique in the New Testament, designating Christ as “the Beloved”); 5:25, 28, 33; 6:24. The adjective ἀγαπητός, “beloved,” is used of Tychicus in Eph 6:21; the same adjectival form in Matt 3:17, 12:18, 17:5; Mark 1:11, 9:7; Luke 3:22 is predicated of Christ. The centrality of the motif of love in Ephesians has been noted by many commentators.

<sup>9</sup> Amor Towles, *A Gentleman in Moscow* (New York: Viking, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Many quotations in this brilliant and hilarious novel underscore the infinite possibilities of the present moment even in confinement. Consider these: “A room that exists in *secret* can, regardless of its dimensions, seem as vast as one cares to imagine” (*A Gentleman in Moscow*, 64), and, “But when the Count opened the small wooden door of the grinder, the world and all it contained were transformed by that envy of the alchemists—the aroma of freshly ground coffee. In that instant, darkness was separated from light, the waters from the lands, and the heavens from the earth” (171). To anyone reading this note: I urge you in the strongest terms to agree with me that coffee is a gift of God. I can brook no dissent on this matter.

<sup>11</sup> Jan-Philipp Sendker, *The Art of Hearing Heartbeats* (translated by Kevin Wiliarty; New York: Other Press, 2006). Originally published in 2002 as *Das Herzenshören* by the Karl Blessing Verlag.

<sup>12</sup> Sendler, *Art of Hearing Heartbeats*, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Sendler, *Art of Hearing Heartbeats*, 130.

<sup>14</sup> Sendler, *Art of Hearing Heartbeats*, 178.

<sup>15</sup> Sendler, *Art of Hearing Heartbeats*, 136.

<sup>16</sup> Sendler, *Art of Hearing Heartbeats*, 177.

<sup>17</sup> Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 83. Powery is reflecting here on claims in Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (translated by Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). In a section on ecumenism and church politics, Moltmann writes, “Once we become conscious of the churches’ imprisonment in particular structures and political constellations, then, if the church is to be helped to find its freedom, there is need of *an ecclesiology which is critical of ideology*” (14, emphasis original).

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<sup>18</sup> Whenever the Gospel lesson for our worship is from John, I am mindful of the crucial importance of the “I Am” sayings that structure that stunning Gospel. The three “I Am” sayings that identify Jesus with life itself are: “I am the bread of life” (6:35), “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), and “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6).