

**Circle of Mercy Sermon**  
**Ephesians 3:14-21**  
**June 5, 2016**  
**by Missy Harris**

Growing up, we sang *Jesus Loves Me* in Sunday School and Children's Choir – several times a week. It was a staple.

Jesus loves me.  
This I know,  
For the Bible tells me so.  
Little ones to him belong.  
They are weak, but he is strong.  
Yes, Jesus loves me.  
Yes, Jesus loves me.  
Yes, Jesus loves me.  
The Bible tells me so.

In the context where I grew up, the statements in this song were a given. The way the Bible was presented to me – I accepted that: Yes, in fact, Jesus loved me. But, while I was growing up, it never really occurred to me to ask any questions about this song. It was almost like the air we breathed. It was there. It was real and true. Why ask any questions?

But today, when I think back to the words of this familiar song, what makes me pause is the claim that the song makes about how I know God's love. It's true, that *some* of my knowledge of God's love for me, in fact, does come from the Bible. But the Bible is really just the beginning.

Our text today from the book of Ephesians is actually a prayer that Paul prayed for the community of Ephesus. We overhear this prayer following the first two chapters of Paul's letter to the people of Ephesus. He had commended them for the ways in which they had come to know and accept the hope and grace toward which God was calling them and for how they had come to accept their new identity in Christ.

In light of what he had already named to be true about the community of Ephesus, Paul's response was to fall down on his knees before God on their behalf. His prayer was for the people of Ephesus to begin to try to comprehend the expansiveness of God's love for them, before he delved into the ethical portion of the letter that follows. He wanted the people to understand the primacy, the givenness of God's love for them – how God's love permeated everything and was with them before they did or said anything.

Paul was addressing the entire community of Ephesus, not just individuals within the community. His prayer indicated that the fullness of God's love is known within community. He wanted them to take in “with all the saints” the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love for them – that it was already present

and at work among them, that it was not something external that they will ever be able to earn.

When I think back to the song *Jesus Loves Me*, I realize that as I sang those words growing up, it wasn't really the words I was singing that were teaching me about God's love or my identity in Christ. Though it would be many years later before I would talk about my experience of God in these terms, I realize that one of the primary ways of knowing and understanding God's love actually came and comes to me through my community and my relationships. While this realization didn't come with a song attached, it too is like the air I breathe. It is there. It is real and true. And there are a heck of a lot more questions than certainties.

What I recognize is that the fullness of God's love has been made known to me:

- when I have injured others and they have extended forgiveness to me.
- when friends have comforted and consoled me in the moments of my deepest pain and sadness.
- when friends have laughed uncontrollably and celebrated with me in the moments of my greatest happiness and celebration.

- when strangers have offered a kind gesture or word to me, when they have had no idea how much I needed their generosity of spirit in that moment.

Life with God and the experience of God's love involves being connected with others. Community and connection are so intimately linked to understanding God's love. The two cannot be separated. We, along with the people of Ephesus, are invited to consider "with all the saints" the breadth, length, depth and height of God's love that is present with us before we say or do anything. We need each other.

Paul also speaks of his hope that the people of Ephesus will be "strengthened in their inner being with power through God's Spirit" as they are "being rooted and grounded in love."

What does it even mean to be "rooted and grounded in love?"

I think Paul is getting at something that is true for all of us. Don't we feel most grounded when we feel loved? When we can point to and name when and where we are loved, aren't we on the threshold of our best potential moments of inner

strength? When we are loved, aren't we able to see a little more clearly how to, in turn, extend that love beyond ourselves?

I can only speak for myself, but when I lose my footing and am not at least aiming to be rooted and grounded in love, the tank of my inner strength is usually running on empty, without even faint fumes to propel me forward. I have to admit that the moments when I feel disconnected and far from being rooted and grounded in love, I feel like I am living in a land that is incredibly distant from my best self.

How often do we sing or say the words from *Jesus Loves Me* (or insert whatever words like them you would use) - How often we sing or say these kinds of words without being able to fully realize or comprehend the possible breadth and length and depth and height that they actually hold for us? How often do we keep on going without pausing in awe of the places and moments where God's love actually is made known to us?

We sometimes do miss these places and moments. One of the ways that we can train our hearts, minds and spirits to tune into and be attentive to those moments is by returning again and again to this practice of being "rooted and grounded in love" of "planting both of our feet firmly on love." It is a practice. It is not

something we do alone. Sometimes, at least for myself, it's the only thing that can call me back from that distant land where my inner strength is empty.

I love the words that Brian prefaces each Taize service with, and this is my paraphrase: "If you are unable to sing or pray, then trust that the prayers and songs of others around you carry you along with us." In the times when we cannot find our way to the path of God's love or see it clearly on our own, we have to depend on the "communion of saints" to carry us along with them. The love is always still there. It precedes us and will be around long after we are gone, but we have to be grounded and rooted in something beyond ourselves to even begin to comprehend it, and sometimes we have to be willing to allow others to carry us along with them.

In my own life I have experienced this to be true. When Abby was born, we were not attending Circle of Mercy regularly. As many of you know, she experienced some health complications in the first year of her life. She spent time in the hospital, about four months with a feeding tube at home, and countless weekly visits to doctors along the way. David and I were running on empty in body, mind and spirit – most of the time operating on auto-pilot and the sheer momentum of doing what had to be done to get through each day.

As I said, it was in a stretch of time when we were not attending Circle of Mercy. But, there were several Sundays in that year when I was at my lowest points, when I would slip in the back of the service with you all – sometimes with Abby, sometimes by myself – and I would leave as soon as the service was over. You carried me along with you in that year, though you likely had no idea at the time when it was happening. This is a community that I could return to because you reminded me of the abundance of God’s love and grace, at a time when I couldn’t see it on my own. You carried me along with you, in ways that you probably will never fully know.

When we feel loved we have a sense of fullness that we can’t really fully explain. It’s not rational. But we know it when we feel it. And I am in agreement with Paul on this one, it’s definitely not something that I could find on my own during that time. I needed community and other people to remind me.

Paul’s challenge is to reach out, test, plumb, and rise in every direction to experience God’s love. It is a risk to reach out for what we can’t see concretely. But it’s worth doing, and in doing these things together, we might move a little closer to living full lives, full in the fullness of God.

Living fully in the fullness of God, is not something that we possess. It possesses us. It is not an experience that exists for us to feel satisfied or content, as if we have arrived and can check it off of our spiritual duties check list. Rather, it is one of the ways that God is made known more fully to the world.

When we are willing to take the risk of reaching out, testing, plumbing and rising in every direction toward the love of God made known in Jesus – toward that which we can't ever completely comprehend, we open ourselves to experiencing God's love in new and expansive ways. And, then we have the capacity together to experience the fullness of God in ways that we might never have the chance to know on our own.

Tonight as we are honoring our graduates, you might expect that I would have a word specifically for them. But the word I would offer to our graduates is not any different than the word I have for us all.

We are all called into this expansive love that God extends toward us and toward the world. God needs us to be known fully in the world. And we need God to

keep drawing us back to the places where we can recognize together what it means to live fully in the fullness that surrounds us in every direction.

So, yes, God loves us.

But it's not just because the Bible tells us so. It's because we know it in our experiences with each other and in the world around us. It's because we know it in the grace and mercy we receive when we've done nothing to deserve or earn it. It's because we know it when we are carried along with others when we can't take the steps or actions on our own.

I pray that we all find our way to the places where we find God's love extended to us in abundance and where we can extend God's love to others in equal abundance. And I pray that when we can't find the path toward this love on our own, that we will at least be able to find our way to the places and people who will carry us along with them.

Amen.