

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / July 4, 2021 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
Un-Bottled: Jesus and Your Emotional Life Series
Experiencing Love (Ephesians 3:14-19)

A story introduces our challenges with being love and loving

Good morning, how are ya'll doing this morning? We're continuing our "Un-Bottled" series that Pastor Dave started last Sunday, as we talk today about love. So let's pray and then dive into God's Word...

So one time I heard another pastor share a story. At the dinner table one night, his preschool aged son told his wife, "Mom, I don't love you." Now it wasn't true, he had just learned that phrase had power and was experimenting with it.

But his mom grew up in a family with a lot of brokenness, essentially becoming an orphan, in and out of various foster homes. She overcame a lot, with God's help, and now as an adult was trying to build a much healthier family with her husband and son.

It just hit her really hard, somewhere deep inside, to hear her little boy say, "Mom, I don't love you." So she immediately burst into tears. That mom experiencing another moment in her life where her longing for love was unmet. It not only brought anguish, but her deep disappointment also hindered her ability to parent her son well in that painful moment, to give him a helpful, teaching response to what he had just said.

Relevance: We all struggle with being loved and loving

Our particulars differ, but we can all identify on some level with that mom. We've all experienced pain and struggle in a relationship related to our longing to feel loved. And also pain and struggle in our own efforts to love others well.

One of my counseling professors, Dr. Gary Barnes, shares how this goes all the way back to the first chapters of the book of Genesis. There we're given a picture of God and humans in a garden enjoying oneness not based in sameness. That though they have differences, Adam and Eve enjoy the intimacy of being known and loved, a oneness not based in sameness.

Adam and Eve are different from God, yet they enjoy love and intimacy with Him, walking in the garden together and being blessed in all sorts of ways by God.

Adam and Eve are also different from each other, and yet they still enjoy real intimacy together: naked and unashamed, known and loved, oneness not based in sameness.

But then Adam and Eve choose life apart from God as they eat the forbidden fruit. Where they once enjoyed intimate oneness, there is now painful separateness from God and with each other as Adam and Eve's hiding begins.

After they sin, they try to hide from God in the Garden. And when "found", rather than try to repair their oneness by repenting of their rebellion, both Adam and Eve instead blame others for their actions.

Adam and Eve also begin hiding from each other, covering themselves with fig leaves. They hide their private parts, the place where they are most physically different from each other and with which they are meant to enjoy a special intimacy as husband and wife.

Adam and Eve lost their oneness not based on sameness, no longer able to fully know and love each other, their sin causing brokenness inside themselves, with each other, and with God as they now hide and harm again and again.

As Dr. Barnes goes on to explain, we continue their tragic story. We're born in sin, as broken people in a broken world. We all have our own dysfunction. I know that I've got a lot. And then we're raised by dysfunctional parents, who were raised by dysfunctional parents. So there's also gaps in our development, as we don't always experience being known and loved in the ways that we need, even if our parents and other caregivers were trying their best.

Our own dysfunctions plus childhood gaps plus everyone else's dysfunctions and childhood gaps means that we're all struggling to be known and loved and to know and love others.

Some just give up on love, settling for something less, like say performing at a high level at work and in relationships in an attempt to at least earn some level of acceptance through their performance. But that pressure to always perform, to always put on their best face, keeps them from experiencing the intimacy and love that they really desire.

Others of us do keep trying to reach the goal of being really known and loved, but we and everyone else seem to keep getting in the way of that goal. To give an example, take hiding. Because of other people's brokenness, sometimes it is wise to hide something about ourselves, to cover with our metaphorical fig leaves. For we've all experienced the pain of sharing something vulnerable and having the other person distance from us, or judge us, or even use it against us. Because of other people's brokenness, sometimes we should hide, even though that hiding keeps us from being known and loved in the ways we want.

And because of our own brokenness, and past negative experiences, sometimes we hide when we don't need to. And in our hiding, we miss out on rich experiences of being known and loved. Some of us even let hiding become our default in every relationship, thinking, "If you really knew me, you wouldn't love me." And so we hide again and again, assuring that we'll never be known and loved as we long to be. And further, this focus on ourselves and what's wrong with us and what we need to hide keeps us from paying attention to others in a way that would free us to really give them love.

And hiding is just one of a myriad of examples I could share of ways that we and others sabotage our yearning to be really known and loved.

Orienting to God's Word – Ephesians 3 speaks to this universal need

Now the apostle Paul, along with the church he ministered to in the city of Ephesus, also experienced this universal struggle: broken people in a broken world desperate for what Adam and Eve once enjoyed. Longing for that oneness not based in sameness, that rich intimacy of feeling fully known and loved even in our difference, and yet we just can't really get there on our own.

So Paul got down on his knees and earnestly asked God to provide what the Ephesians, and we, need in Ephesians chapter 3. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the New Testament book of Ephesians, chapter 3. Ephesians 3. And if not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers and the little numbers are verse numbers.

Ephesians was a letter written by Paul to some early Christian churches a few decades after Jesus rose from the dead. Chapters 1-3 show that all who believe in Jesus, even in all our diversity, are still united as one body, the church. The church is to be a place of oneness not based in sameness. And we the church together enjoy incredible blessings in Jesus, now and forever.

Then starting in Ephesians chapter 4, Paul explains how the church is to walk in light of our incredible shared blessing from God. That we are to love God and live in His good ways. And love and build each other up in the church even with our many differences. And love and build up everyone in our homes and be God's representatives of love to the world around us.

But to live out this high calling of love in our world, with all our dysfunctions, is going to require something out of this world.

Teaching: As we actively depend on God in relationship...

God's Spirit strengthens us – So Paul asks God to provide these early Christians with what they, and we, need starting in verse 14. **(14-16)**

¹⁴For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,

Paul bows before our heavenly Father and asks out of God's glorious, limitless riches to powerfully strengthen the Ephesians.

Paul prays that God's Spirit strengthens us inside, in our inner being, as verse 16 says. Paul discusses our "inner being" in other places in the New Testament like Romans 7 and 2 Corinthians 4, and it includes the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects inside of us.¹

So when you hear "inner being", think of what's inside of us, things like our thoughts and emotions and conscience. Because of our struggle with sin, our inner being needs to be empowered by God's Spirit.

And not just once. We must continue to receive and respond to the empowering presence and activity of God's Spirit in our lives.

We can't really know and love God and people in our own power. So Paul doesn't tell the Ephesians to love in their own strength. Rather, Paul asks God to strengthen them through His Spirit.

So in our relationship with God, we don't want an independent posture. We don't want to do things for God but do them apart from depending on God's power. Because even our good efforts like reading the Bible and praying and serving in church cannot on their own cause us to really know and love God and people well. In our relationship with God, we're not independent, doing stuff for God but separate from God. Rather, we're dependent on God's Spirit to strengthen us inside.

¹ Louw Nida Greek Lexicon – "the psychological faculty, including intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects, in contrast with the purely physical aspects of human existence—"the inner being, the inmost being, inwardly."

We experience intimacy with Jesus – And in the next verse, Paul shares the reason why he prays for God to spiritually strengthen us. Verse 17: **(17a)**

¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

Paul is writing to Christians, so this verse is not talking about Jesus coming in someone's heart for the first time at the point of salvation, when they first believe.

Rather, Christ dwelling here in verse 17 is talking about Jesus settling down in our heart, really making His home here. "Heart" here in verse 17 is parallel with the "inner person" in verse 16. Your heart here is also what's inside of you, things like your thoughts and emotions and will. And there in your heart, your control center, Jesus' presence and rule is to be welcomed.

In verse 17 we see that Jesus dwelling in our hearts comes through faith. So we must be exercising faith to experience Christ's dwelling in this way. Back in verse 16, we saw that we aren't to depend on ourselves. We're not to be independent from God, even when doing good things like reading the Bible. Rather, we depend on God to meet us and grow us as we engage with His Word.

And verse 17 clarifies here that our relationship with God is not to be a passive dependence. We're not to just passively sit around in our underwear and never read our Bible or pray or engage in the life of the church and just expect God's Spirit to somehow magically strengthen us to really know and love God and people.

No, we have a part to play. We are to exercise faith, as verse 17 says, and as we do, Christ really settles down in our heart, making His home there. So our relationship with God is one of active dependence.

We're similar to a sailor on a sailboat. We can't make the wind blow, but we can actively set up our spiritual sail as we do things like read the Bible and pray and engage in the life of the church. Doing so in a way that still depends on the wind to do its part as it blows and carries us along.

So as the wind of the Spirit blows in our lives, we are to exercise faith, as verse 17 says. We are to actively depend on Jesus, trusting Him and obeying Him and seeking to know Him more as we invite Jesus' rule in our hearts. As we welcome Jesus in our hearts in this way, He makes His home there, and we experience more intimacy with Him and become more like Him, including in how we express His love to others.

Perhaps that's why, in the gospel of Luke chapter 6, one of the reasons given to love even our enemies is a call to imitate God, Who is kind and merciful to all. For as we experience the love of God in relationship with Him, we become more like Him, and are able to imitate more how He loves, even with those who treat us as enemies.

As the Spirit strengthens us and Christ dwells in us, we'll have our whole lives rooted and established in God's love, as the rest of verse 17 goes on to say. It says... **(17b)**

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,

“Rooted” here is an agricultural metaphor, that God's love is like the healthy soil we are grounded in and we grow in. “Established” here in verse 17 is an architectural metaphor, that God's love is like the stable, firm foundation that our lives are built upon.

Paul has been telling the Ephesians earlier in this letter about God's amazing love. But he's saying here in this prayer in chapter 3 that we need to experience it, we need to feel God's love in our lives, to be firmly rooted and established in the love of God.

That young boy from my opening story, who told his mom that he didn't love her, tried the same thing with his dad that night. As his dad is putting him to bed, he tells his son, “I love you.” And his son replies, “I don't love you.” But having seen what happened at the dinner table, the dad is ready. He tells his son, “That's okay, because I have enough love for both of us.”

Then his son pauses... and next asks, “Dad, how do I know if I love you?” His dad answers, “Right now in your life buddy, what's more important is that you know you're fully loved. As you know that you're fully loved, you're going to understand love more and more.”

We're not different from that young boy. We too need to experience being fully loved, even more than what a good but flawed earthly father can provide. We need to experience the fullness of Jesus' perfect love.

We experience the fullness of Jesus' love and of God – Paul's prayer for the Spirit's strengthening and the Son's dwelling in our lives, for this rooting and grounding in love, has a purpose. He shares that purpose starting in verse 18. It's so that we... **(18-19)**

¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

The purpose of Paul's prayer is that we may have power, together in unity with all the church, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. So it's not only an individual thing of you alone experiencing the vastness of Jesus' love.

It's also a communal thing, of the church together experiencing the vastness of Jesus' love. In fact, each of the "you's" and "your's" in verses 14-19 are plural in the Greek language that Ephesians was originally written in.

So you could translate the "you's" and "your's" in Texan as "ya'll" and "ya'll's". For example, the beginning of verse 17 could be translated, "so that Christ may dwell in ya'll's hearts through faith."

Now here in verse 18, notice how Paul emphasizes the vast dimensions of Jesus' love, how it is "wide and long and high and deep." Other religions focus on what you must do to get to God or heaven or enlightenment or whatever the end goal is.

But the gospel is about Jesus, in love, paying any price to get us back to God. Jesus fully knows us, including every ugly thing I've ever done or thought and every ugly thing still inside me today. He knows all the dirt on all of us, and yet He still came on a rescue mission for us, making Himself vulnerable for us as He became a baby, and suffered in our broken world with us, and though totally innocent, sacrificed Himself for us on the cross.

That's the kind of bursting heart of love that Jesus has for you, opening His arms wide to you, even when nailed to the cross; a love compelled to take that kind of radical action, pay even that kind of radical price to save you from your sins, because He loves you!

A love so vast that we actually need divine power, as verse 18 says, to grasp just how wide and long and high and deep is this indescribable love of Christ for you.

Paul doesn't just want us to only theoretically know up in our heads that Jesus loves us. This prayer has focused on experiencing a relationship with God, and verse 19 continues this focus as it describes the love of Jesus as surpassing knowledge, an experience of love beyond mere human knowing.

One day, early in my time at the church, I was in my office reflecting on the parable of the prodigal son while looking at a famous painting of it. And my thoughts turned to my son Grant, who was only two at the time, about how much compassion and joy I'd feel if he was to return home broken after walking a destructive path, like the prodigal son.

As I thought about the parable and my love for my son, God just overwhelmed me with an incredibly powerful sense of His fatherly love for me. God is with us all the time, but I was now very tangibly aware that God was in the room with me, pouring out His love on me, filling my whole body and heart and mind with His love.

During those minutes, as God was overwhelming me with an experience of His love, He was also giving me a new level of love for Pastor Dave, who was in the office next door. Honestly, a love way beyond anything I had felt to that point.

I thought about that experience this week, not only because it illustrates experiencing some of the vastness of Jesus' love, but also because of how Paul's prayer concludes. We experience this vast love of Jesus, so that, as the end of verse 19 says, we "may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

So not only experiencing the fullness of God's love ourselves, but also filled with God's love for others, as I was in my experience for Pastor Dave. That's why Paul next calls us in chapters 4-6 of Ephesians to live out this love. Loving God in return, and loving each other, and our homes, and the world around us. In the process getting closer to oneness not based in sameness with each other, closer to fully known and fully loved together. It all starts with us experiencing God's love in relationship, as Paul prays here in Ephesians 3.

Next Step

We've seen this morning that we yearn to get back to Eden, to oneness not based in sameness, to the intimacy of fully known and fully loved.

But because we, and everyone else, are broken people who were raised by broken parents who were raised by broken parents, we just can't get back there on our own. We hide behind our fig leaves, unable to be fully known and loved, and lacking the power in our sin struggle to fully know and love others.

So as my professor Dr. Barnes says, "We need an out of this world love to love in this world." So God has provided us what we desperately need, fully knowing us, including our many flaws, and yet still loving us unconditionally.

So our next step this morning is to seek relationship with God. That's our application: seek relationship with God. As we actively depend on God, God's Spirit will strengthen us, and God's Son will dwell in our hearts through faith, and we will experience some of how wide and

long and high and deep is the love of Christ. Fully known and yet still fully loved, without conditions, in spite of anything we might do, because of what Jesus has done for us.

This healing love of Christ filling us with all the fullness of God, finally freeing us to really love others, even with their flaws, even as they hurt us, even though they can never provide the perfect love we need.

Dr. Barnes likes to quote his brother Craig, who says, “The secret to intimacy is experiencing the sufficiency of God’s love apart from the other person. It’s the only way you will ever be free to give love to another human being who cannot meet the deepest needs of your soul.”

So now let’s remember this amazing love and seek relationship with God, as we take the Lord’s Supper together. What joy there is at the Lord’s table, where we are fully known, and yet still fully loved. Amen.