

Tethered
Ephesians 1:11-23
The Message

11 It's in Christ that we find out
who we are and what we are living for.
Long before we first heard of Christ
and got our hopes up,
he had his eye on us,
had designs on us for glorious living,
12 part of the overall purpose
he is working out in everything and everyone.
13 It's in Christ that you once you heard the truth
and believed it (this Message of your salvation),
found yourselves home free
- signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit.
14 This signet from God
is the first installment on what's coming,
a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us,
a praising and glorious life.

15 That's why,
when I heard of the solid trust you have
in the Master Jesus
and your outpouring of love to all the Christians,
16 I couldn't stop thanking God for you
- every time I prayed,
I'd think of you and give thanks.
17 But I do more than thank.
I ask - ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ,
the God of glory
- to make you intelligent
and discerning in knowing him personally,
18 your eyes focused and clear,
so that you can see exactly
what it is he is calling you to do,
grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life
he has for Christians,
19 oh, the utter extravagance
of his work in us who trust him

- endless energy, boundless strength!

20 All this energy issues from Christ:
God raised him from death
and set him on a throne in deep heaven,
21 in charge of running the universe,
everything from galaxies to governments,
no name and no power exempt from his rule.
And not just for the time being, but forever.

22 He is in charge of it all,
has the final word on everything.
At the center of all this,
Christ rules the church.

23 The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world;
the world is peripheral to the church.
The church is Christ's body,
in which he speaks and acts,
by which he fills everything with his presence.

Have you seen the PBS show,
Finding Your Roots,
with Henry Louis Gates Jr.?
In the show,
Professor Gates explores the ancestry
of dozens of influential people
from diverse backgrounds,
taking [millions of] viewers
deep into the past
to reveal the connections that bind us all.”¹

He has professional researchers
comb through paper trails and records;
scientists who use DNA
to uncover the background stories
of his guest’s ancestors.
Gates team searches and scourers each person’s past
—retracing the journey their ancestors took,
to see what they share
with the men and women

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/weta/finding-your-roots/about/about-series/>

who literally laid the ground work
for their success.

The most recent episode
featured two celebrities
with similar backgrounds;
Eric Stonestreet and Melissa McCarthy;
both are Midwesterners
who left their family's farming backgrounds
to pursue careers in comedy and acting.

McCarthy's journey starts
with her paternal grandfather
who came from Scotland.
He was Michael Carty in Scotland,
one of seven children,
growing up in harsh conditions
working the industrial row
of Scotland's iron industry.

Her grandfather Michael never talked a lot
about his father, Thomas,
because Thomas (McCarthy learns)
died of pneumonia at 45,
when Michael was only 6 years old.
So there are no stories,
no history of her family
from before her great-grandfather
leaving McCarthy to feel
that her roots really didn't stretch very far.

On the show
she learns the truth
of family lore;
a story that could never be fully confirmed

—that her great-grandfather
immigrated to Scotland from Ireland
because of the extreme poverty
that overtook the Irish landscape
in the late 19th century.

She was shocked to find out
she had deep Irish roots,
not Scottish like her family had (somewhat) suspected.
Gates' team was able to trace back
her great-grandfather, Thomas,
to a single parish in central Ireland
and found generations of the Carty family.

In the episode,
she stares at the names
from her Irish family tree and says,
"I've never seen these names,
no one knows these names.

***Now somehow I feel tethered
to something and to a place."***

Turning to Eric Stonestreet,
Gates begins with
his maternal grandmother, Helen,
who was born to German immigrants
in Kansas soon after the start of WWI.

Gates tells stories
and gives a historical background
for her life that Stonestreet never knew.
During WWI, German immigrants
were viewed with heavy suspicion
in the US and many were made
to register with their local authorities
as "an alien enemy."

In spite of all that
when the war ended,
Stonestreet's great-grandfather Wilhelm,
who Anglicized his name to William,
filed for US citizenship.

Eric doesn't speak German
and neither did his parents
or grandmother
—and it is no surprise
that after German immigrants
were treated so badly
that many of them left behind
much of their German heritage.
But as Stonestreet reflects on this,
he says,
you know a lot of our food
and cooking had a German influence;
***most of us connect to our heritage
through food.***²

To me, those two sentiments,
of feeling rooted to people and place,
and connecting to our heritage through food
are two deeply rooted realities
we experience in the church.

Yearly, in fact
we are eager to trace
our own roots and heritage.
Just last Sunday,
we celebrated the Protestant Reformation
—the 502nd anniversary
some 4,479 miles away
from where it all began.

² Both McCarthy's and Stonestreet's stories come from, PBS Finding Your Roots: Season 6, episode 2 Premiered, Oct. 15, 2019 <https://www.pbs.org/video/off-the-farm-u1lqm2/>

In honoring our Reformed Presbyterian roots,
we harken back to years ago
and use words like bulwark and fortress
in our hymns and liturgies.
We enjoy the crooning of bagpipes
Some of us even wear a tartan or plaid;
to tether us to a history
and people of long ago.

We remember those priests,
the parish church workers,
those men and women,
the saints of old,
who paved the way
for our intellectual and spiritual freedom
in worship and faith.

Recently, Alan Harrill hung
all the portraits of former FPC pastors
on the hallway wall
outside of Whit's office.

Rev. Thomas Thurston
was the second pastor of this church,
following the founding pastor,
Reverend George Gibbs.
Thomas Thurston began his call in 1879,
(140 yrs ago if you are counting)
and Rev. Thurston,
split his time with us
and the church in Taylorsville.

Sadly 5 years later in 1884,
he and his daughter Alice
were crossing the Catawba River
on their way to Taylorsville
and drowned.

Their remains were buried in the church yard
at the old Presbyterian church
—which has an historic marker downtown.
But when the new church was built in 1905,

they were moved to Oakwood Cemetery.

Some of you have friends and family
buried there too.

And just like that we are tethered and rooted
to people and place.

Bread pudding is a holiday treat many love.

I'll be honest, it is not a dessert I like,
but for most of the years that I can recall,
around the second week of December,
there in the workroom,
the smell of butter and bread
would fill the staff hall.

Plugged in on the counter
would sit a dish
of fresh, warm, homemade bread pudding,
made by Betty Bowman.

Bread, milk, eggs,

I don't know what all went
into this dessert,
but I do know
that when I see bread pudding
listed on a menu, or smell bread pudding
in a restaurant,

I think of Betty Bowman
—her gift, quietly given,
year after year,
to show her love for our staff
during the Advent season.

Tethered and connected to each other,
to our church family
through food.

Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus
reminds the church then
and the church now
that we are tethered
most importantly to Jesus

and then to each other.
This passage ends with Paul's reminder,
"The church is Christ's body,
in which he speaks and acts,
by which he fills everything
with his presence."

And the beginning of the passage
Tells the body, the church,
"It's in Christ
that we find out
who we are
and what we are living for."

Those are beautiful words.

Words that are life giving.

Paul's assertion is that in our shared ancestor,
this rabbi from Galilee,
this Jewish boy born to Mary and Joseph,
this messiah and savior;
in tracing our many and varied heritages
and our adoptions in this family
back to him,
we find out who we are.

Think about that for a moment.

Our identity is found and given form
in who Christ is.

And that means the that at the core of who we are,
we look to a son, a man, a teacher,
who lived for and served others.

We find at the core of who we are,
are people who model a savior
who stopped at nothing,
not even death,
to show everyone and everything
that God's purpose for life,
is the kingdom's advent,
which is life in abundance.

A life that is tethered
to the ongoing cycle of community and creation;
life that is given meaning
in the good purposes and will of God.

Part of the appeal of Finding Your Roots,
is being able to see the histories
of Gates' usually famous guests
become people with special ties to a grandparent;
with Cher or Terry Gross, or Bryant Gumbel
with stories and histories,
just like you and me.

In fact many of those stories and histories
bind us together
—as Midwesterners with German roots,
or people who can trace their ancestors
back to Scotland and Ireland
and so many other places.

When Gates makes history come alive,
in hearing about the hardships
our ancestors endured
and the many lands they emigrated from,
we find we are all tied
to the same history and story,
the same heritage and roots.

In the same way reading Paul's letter to his churches
or hearing stories of Jesus
is meant to remind us
that this is our shared heritage and family.

Years ago, I remember Bob Sauer
at the Jr. High Heritage Luncheon
talking about his family's (I believe it was) German heritage;
I was in awe of how much he knew,
how he'd traced a family line
through the years and of course
how it connected to music.

I'm still fascinated by seeing pictures
of my paternal grandparents

when they were children.
I relished the spring my mother and sister and I
traveled to Indiana
and were able to see the home
where my maternal grandmother
grew up on the shores of Clear Lake.

Without stories,
without looking back
and understanding where we have come from,
it is hard to imagine
the many distant generations
who came before us.
We need the retelling of
our roots and our heritage.

Long before there was ever a me or a you,
some of our great-great-great grandparents
sat in meeting houses to pray,
to sing,
to shush their children
while the minister preached.

Though this moment we can only see
those of us who are gathered here,
generations of Presbyterians
have gathered in this place
to sing, to celebrate the seasons,
to baptize babies
and to bury loved ones,
together as a family of believers.

Think of Rev. Thurston's congregation,
gathered to hear the gospel story,
the promises of God;
think of them preparing for us
—because as Paul says
that was God's will all along.

J.D.G. Dunn writes,
“Jesus himself is the ‘place’
in which the blessings of heaven and the Spirit
are to be known in the here and now,
so that the very term ‘Christian’
denotes a life (and death)
bound up with his.”³

It is in Christ
that we find out who we are
and what we are living for.

In favorite TV show of mine,
the dad asks his son,
“what have I always said
was the most important thing?”
The son quickly
and incorrectly answers,
“Breakfast.”
“Family, son;” the dad replies,
“family is the most important.”

Unlike other places and people,
the church because it is Christ’s body
is our family tether,
our generational tether,
our tether across this life and the life to come,
our tether of saints past and present.

The church fastens us together in Christ,
who like Paul says,
has had his eye on us
for the overall purpose
he is working out in everyone and everything.

³ J.D.G.Dunn, “Ephesians,” in the Oxford Common Bible Commentary, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1168.

This is the work of the church
as Christ's body
for it to fill everything and everyone
with Christ's presence.

May we find comfort in that
—that Christ is working out his purpose,
not in just you or just me;
not just the saint in Bible study
that reads his Bible every day
and lets scripture roll off his tongue;
not just the saint
who volunteers her time at every Habitat build,
and Sabbath Soup Kitchen

—but Christ, Paul affirms,
is working out God's good purpose
in everyone and everything.
In the New Testament,
"Saints are both young and old,
both living and departed;
they are all who have responded
affirmatively to God's call."⁴

In that wideness,
in that depth of time and space
across oceans journeys
and immigrated great-grandparents,
in Jesus's life of grace love and mercy,
we find out who we are.

Today we celebrate All Saints Day,
where will name our church members
who have died to this life
and have been welcomed
into the life eternal.

⁴ Robert E. Dunham, *Feasting On the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4 (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2010) pg. 231

We give thanks for their witness
and their hard work and commitment
to serving Jesus and loving God's people.
We give thanks and remember
the saints **in our lives**,
our friends, our family members,
our loved ones,
who were instrumental
in helping us live into God's will for us all.

We give thanks and remember
trusting that Christ was working out
his good purpose in them.
Remembering the saints brings us to the table.

This table,
though it does not look anything
like the tables in our houses,
this is the table of this house
—where this meal tethers
us as a family
together.

This is the meal,
the food that ties us
to our shared heritage
and gives us meaning.
This bread and cup
are the food that binds us together
with the saints in these pews
and the saints of glory.

With Paul and Anna and Teresa
and Martin and Calvin and Wesley
and Thomas and Al and Nan and Betty.

This is our shared heritage,
the table that tethers us together
and reminds us that in bread and cup,
we share more than a meal,

we share lives that are lived for others,
we share in the life abundant
that overcomes death;
this is the place, in Christ
where we share
who we are and what we are living for.

When we hear the names spoken in our liturgy;
when we see the names
on the friendship pads
passed down the rows and pews,
when we celebrate the feast of our Lord:
remember that you are tethered
to a place
and to a people
and to something much bigger
than we can imagine and hope for.