

ROOTED AND GROUNDED IN LOVE
Ephesians 3:14-21

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Before leaving on vacation a few weeks ago, I went to the bookshelf in our bedroom where I have a shelf of books yet to be read. I grabbed the first one, one I bought last summer upon the recommendation of a woman in my book club. Written by a woman who now lives in Cleveland, and a winner of the Cleveland Arts Prize, it's not a summer beach read, but I do recommend it. The title of the book is First They Killed My Father. It's a memoir of a woman named Loung Ung who was born in Cambodia in 1970. The book is about the four-year reign of terror in Cambodia from 1975 until 1979 when the Khmer Rouge organization took over that country. People were forced from their homes and into labor camps. In four years, fully one-fourth of the citizens of Cambodia were killed - 2 million people.

Loung Ung was one of the survivors, and she tells of what it was like to be a child of five, six, seven, eight years old pulling leeches off her bare feet, stealing food, and watching her body transform from that of a well-fed child into that of a malnourished one with distended belly and skin so taut she felt she could prick it with a pin and she would pop and vanish.

I confess I knew almost nothing about the plight of the Cambodian people before I read this book.

What I remember is what what I was doing in the years 1975 through 1979. I couldn't have been more comfortable or more happy. I was finishing high school,

visiting colleges, starting college, and then spending my junior year in Europe, traveling abroad for the first time. Enjoying every privilege of the American middle class lifestyle.

Luong Ung was working all day in rice paddies, learning to step over both land mines and dead bodies. Here's one paragraph from her memoir. She was six at this time: "The cooks continue to make rice soup in a big pot and serve it to the villagers. During mealtime, my family lines up with our soup bowls in our hands along with the other villagers to receive our ration. The cooks used to serve us rice gruel, but now there are only enough grains in the pot to make soup. When it is my turn to receive the food, I watch anxiously as the cook stirs the rice soup. Holding my breath nervously, I pray she will take pity on me and scoop my ladle of soup from the bottom of the pot, where all the solid food rests. Staring at the rice pot, I let out a breath of hopelessness when I see her take the ladle and stir the soup at my turn..."

...I never eat my soup all at once. I sit quietly, savoring it spoonful by spoonful, drinking the broth first. What's left at the bottom of my bowl is approximately three spoonfuls of rice, and I have to make this last. I eat the rice slowly, and even pick up one grain if i drop it on the ground. When it is gone I will have to wait until tomorrow before I can have more. I look into my bowl, and my heart cries as i count the eight grains that are left in my bowl. Eight grains are all I have left! I pick up each grain and chew it slowly, trying to relish the taste, not wanting to swallow. Tears mix with the food in my mouth; my heart falls to my stomach when all the eight grains are gone..."

Loung Ung was fortunate to have survived, but part of the reason she survived is that she had an incredible inner strength. She is one of those plucky individuals who seems to have an innate survivor instinct. She was a fighter, even at such a young age.

She credits her father with instilling that strength in her, both through genetics, and through his love and nurturing. Towards the end of the Khmer Rouge reign of terror, she and one brother and sister live with another family in a refugee camp. The family agrees to take them in exchange for work. They're grateful for the shelter but the family is mean. The mother doesn't like Loung and says to her one day, "You are so stupid you will amount to nothing." "No, you're wrong," Loung mutters back. "I am going to be somebody great." She remembers, over and over again, her father's words to her, as she was a young child: "No one knows how precious you are. You are a diamond in the rough and with a little polishing, you will shine." She writes: "I know what it feels like to be loved. [My father] loved me and believed in me...I...possess the one thing I need to make something of myself one day: I have everything [my father] gave me."

Loung Ung survived the unspeakable, at least in part, because she knew she was loved. She knew her life had value and potential. Her life was rooted and grounded in love. There's nothing mushy or sentimental about that kind of love. It made her fierce, in fact. That's the power of love.

How would the world be different if every child in the world knew that they were loved, by their family members and by God? How would the world be different if every child in the world knew that they were precious, that they were meant to shine?

I was talking the other day with Carolyn Coy who has just retired after a brilliant career with the Lorain public schools (my words, to be sure...she is far too humble to say that.) I told Carolyn that one of my dreams for our church is that we develop a partnership with an urban school, offering tutoring and mentoring. She talked about the students whose lives she touched, and how you never know which seeds will blossom.

Some of the students are able to overcome the obstacles in their lives, and some are crushed by them. So she issued a caution, right up front. “If we do that,” she said, “you need to prepare people for the certainty that not every encounter with a student will be positive or rewarding.” She’s right, of course. Not every seed we plant will grow to fruition. After all, there were thousands of other young children in Cambodia who were also loved by their parents who did not survive the genocide. Yet the seeds of love are always worth planting.

Our scripture for today talks about the power of love at work within human lives. I’d like to read it to you again, this time from The Message version of the Bible:

¹⁴⁻¹⁹ My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you’ll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ’s love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.

²⁰⁻²¹ God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.”

The human spirit, when it is rooted and grounded in love, is given all it needs to accomplish more than we can ever imagine.

And as Pete said in his introduction to the scripture, this powerful love is both a personal gift and one we experience in community. We are given power to face the challenges in our individual lives, and to activate our own God-given gifts AND we are given power to do things together that we would never be able to do alone.

You cannot read the New Testament, especially these letters written to the early church, without thinking about what it means to be in community. It is not just nice to be together, pleasant to enjoy one another's company. It is not just fun to sing as one big group. Community is absolutely essential for life and for faith.

As we gather together this morning, we are once again including in our prayers words of support following another example of gun violence in our nation. It has sadly, tragically, become an almost weekly occurrence. When I hear and read these stories - just this summer, it's been Charleston and then Chattanooga, and now Lafayette Louisiana - I will tell you I have two impulses. One is to stop reading. To turn the page or click the mouse and read something more pleasant instead. In other words, to escape. But then I think, "Sunday's coming. And on Sunday we will pray, as a church family, knowing that thousands of other people of faith are joining together in churches, mosques and synagogues to pray also." I think, "Sunday's coming. And I will be with other people who are doing our part to work for peace, to plant seeds of love and hope."

If I didn't have the church, I would bury my head in the sand in despair. For there are other books on my shelf I have yet to read, books about other tragedies in other places. There are more stories of innocents killed, genocides we've barely heard about.

There are going to be other horrifying headlines. It all becomes too much, or it could. If we didn't have each other. If we were not rooted and grounded in love.

Several years ago, I officiated at a funeral, and afterwards, the family gave me a planter. It was in a basket, and contained about five different kinds of plants. I put it on the windowsill in my office and it did pretty well, without much attention from me except a weekly watering. Over the past year, it started looking scraggly, though. One of the plants was clearly dying. The leaves were turning yellow. When I watered it weekly, I would pull a few dead leaves off. And one of the plants was growing quite tall, clearly outgrowing the basket. The whole planter looked pathetic. Each week, I would say, "I really need to do something about that." Well, summer came, and my schedule is a bit lighter in the summer, so finally one day I took action. I could tell that I needed to take apart the collection of plants, replant the tall plant in one pot, bid the dying plant farewell, and replant the others. I took the planter home, stopping at Ace hardware on the way to buy two nice new pots. When I got home, I took the whole plant outside and turned it upside down, shaking it gently out of its longtime basket home. But pulling those plants apart was far more difficult than I had anticipated. The roots were bound together so tightly that I could barely separate them out, one from another.

The ties that bind us together in the church can be so strong that they even endure the separation caused by death. When we are rooted together in love, we are grounded in a life force that helps us, as individuals, to sustain pain and anguish, and which creates the soil in which hope can grow.

As we pray, hear again the words of Ephesians:

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,^[a] ¹⁵ from whom every family^[b] in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.