

That Christ May Dwell in Your Hearts

Preached on Trinity 16
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ, Vt.
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Ephesians 3: 13-21

We've all heard the old adage "Home is where the heart is." But I think if the Apostle Paul were here with us today, he would probably rearrange the words like this: "Heart is where Jesus's home is." Or, to express this in terms of his theology, "The human heart is where God wants to make His dwelling." Paul says,

"For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. (Ephesians 3:14-17a)

This morning, let us take a few minutes to understand how such a miraculous thing, Jesus dwelling within us, might be possible.

In the verses leading up to our passage for today, Paul describes how God is carrying out His eternal purpose through the body of believers called the Church. The promised final act of God's reconciling the whole world to Himself has begun decisively in the life, death, and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ. Our passage today is really a passionate prayer that reflects this profound mystery. It starts rather abruptly in our reading this morning, and so we need a little more context. Paul states that "for this reason I bow my knees before the Father..." For what reason? Obviously, it refers back to what Paul has written previously in this letter, but what exactly is the reason for which he is praying? The immediate context is provided a few verses earlier, where Paul points out the fact that God's children have been gathered together in the Church for the purpose of making God's manifold wisdom evident here on earth and in the heavens. This, says Paul in verse 11, "was according to the eternal purpose which [God] has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confidence of access through our faith in him." So Paul is praying because he is confident that God will prepare us to be fit vessels to carry out God's sovereign plan. As he prays boldly, so can we, because our access is based on what Jesus has done for us, "for through Him we [all] have access in one Spirit to the Father." (Ep. 2:18) But even if we do come boldly, we also need to come with reverence and awe, in an attitude of humility. We come to the King of Kings, in whose household we are privileged to dwell.

If we are members of the Church, we all have the same Father. It doesn't matter whether we are Jew or Gentile, male or female, black or white, rich or poor. We are all God's children and God loves all his children equally. He doesn't play favorites. So when Paul prays, he is praying for all of God's children, including all of us who are followers of Jesus Christ. Let us make this prayer our own and pray with Paul that our Christ may dwell in our hearts today.

The word translated "dwell" is an interesting word. In Greek, as you might expect, there are several different words that mean to live or to dwell. The one that Paul chose to use here is

a word that means to “settle down and be at home.” Paul’s prayer for us is that we’d be able to do the same thing spiritually with our hearts that most of us already do with our homes—make it a place of permanent residence. These are the terms by which Jesus wants to abide with us.

Even though Jesus wishes to be in close communion with us, Paul’s prayer here makes it clear that our lives may not be quite ready for Jesus to settle down and be at home there. So, the obedient Christian life is really a process of having our lives transformed so that we can become more and more like Jesus and prepare our hearts to be the His home. Let’s look again at Paul’s prayer and see what will help us to make sure that our heart is where God’s home is. There are four guidelines.

First, we must rely on God’s riches. We must pray with Paul that out of God’s glorious riches he may strengthen us with power. When we as finite humans tackle various projects, we are limited to whatever resources that we have available—time, materials, and money as well as physical and mental ability. But the great thing about preparing our hearts for Christ to take up permanent residence is that we’re not dependent on our own resources. As Paul writes, we have access to the glorious riches of God. We read about those glorious riches from the very beginning of Ephesians. We’ve been chosen by God and adopted into His family. Jesus has redeemed us from a futile way of life through his death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit lives in our lives as a guarantee of both present and future spiritual riches. We’ve been joined together with other believers in the Church for the purpose of revealing God’s wisdom both here on earth and in the heavens. And if God has already done all that for His children, don’t you think that He is capable of equipping us with everything we need to prepare our hearts so Jesus can come and make Himself at home there?

Paul reinforced this principle in Philippians: “And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. (4:19) It is a great relief to know that I’m not limited by my own resources. In the process of preparing my heart so Jesus can settle in there, I have the glorious riches of God at my disposal. But how am I able to plug into that power that God provides?”

This brings us guideline number two. Submit to the Spirit, through his Spirit. We very clearly see the Trinity at work here in Paul’s prayer. He prays to God the Father, who is the source of the glorious riches and the power that is available to us. And the purpose of that power is to enable us to prepare our hearts so that His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, can come and take up residence. And it is the Holy Spirit who is the conduit through whom that power and those resources flow into our lives. The Holy Spirit has a number of functions in our lives. We’ve already seen in Ephesians that he serves as guarantee of our future inheritance of the riches of God. But one of His other important roles is to point us to Jesus Christ. Just before He went to the cross, Jesus described that role: “[T]he Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” (John 14:26) So at least one of the ways that the Holy Spirit is the conduit for the riches of God is that He reminds us of the teachings of Jesus and helps us to apply those teachings in our lives.

Although walking in the Spirit should be the condition of all Christians, the Bible is very clear that we can impede His work in our lives. Paul points out later in Ephesians that we can grieve the Holy Spirit of God. (Ephesians 4:30) And then there is this passage in 1st Thessalonians: “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire.” (5:19) Although we don’t have time this

morning to explore these verses in great detail, they both make it clear that the Holy Spirit will not force us to respond to the revelation that He brings into our lives. We can grieve the Holy Spirit and we can quench His work in our lives. Whenever the Holy Spirit leads us and reminds us of the teachings of Jesus, we can either choose to respond by submitting our lives to that work of the Spirit and making the necessary changes, or we can choose to ignore that revelation. If I want to make my heart God's home, I need to develop the habit of submitting my life to the work of the Holy Spirit. As I read the Bible and pray, I need to do it with an attitude of humility and submission. This will enable my willing to response to the work of the Holy Spirit in my life, even before I know what He will reveal to me.

Third, we must emphasize the eternal in our inner being, that is, our hearts. This principle is so important that Paul uses two different phrases to describe the idea of developing our inner lives. Both the inner being (literally the "inner man") and our hearts describe the very center of our being. That includes our personality, thoughts, will and emotions. And it is that part of our lives we need to develop in order for Jesus to truly dwell within us.

Jesus is interested in living in a solid home. At this point, it is difficult to resist some construction metaphors. God is looking for more than cosmetic changes. Renovating a house can reveal what previous owners wished to conceal, or just didn't want to think about. It doesn't take much digging to see structural issues that someone hoped to hide. Our hearts are similar. We spend a lot of time making sure that people see only what we want them to see. This used to be called "impression management." It is not that hard to deceive others by erecting a pleasing facade. Of course, Jesus is not fooled. He wants us to be truly what we were meant to be. He wants us to be solid, with a strong foundation and adequate framing. We can spend all of our time on the cosmetic—and many of us do—but if we don't take care of the inner man, our hearts, then the hollowness of our spirits will eventually be revealed.

So how do we make sure that we develop and strengthen that inner man? Paul gives us some hints about how we do that in 2nd Corinthians:

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."
(4:16-18)

Paul makes it quite clear that the way that we are renewed inwardly is focusing on developing those things that will last for eternity—my character, my thought life, my devotion, rather than those things that will pass away—my body and my material possessions. This is not to say that we are not to take care of our bodies or be good stewards of the material goods with which God has entrusted us. In fact, the Bible clearly teaches that we should do both of those things. But he is saying that our main focus should be on developing those parts of our lives that will last for eternity. It only makes sense that if Jesus is to be at home in our hearts, that is where we ought to focus our time and our resources.

Fourth and last, we are to trust in God's truth, through faith. When Paul writes that Christ dwells in our hearts through faith, the faith that he is describing is much more than just some intellectual belief. That's certainly part of faith, but it's really only a starting point. If we want Jesus to be at home on our hearts, we need to have a much more encompassing kind of faith.

James is really helpful in describing that kind of faith: “But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.” (James 2: 18-19) There are some people who will try to claim that James’ writings contradict Paul’s claim that salvation is by faith alone and not a result of our works. But if you read Paul’s letters carefully, you will find that both men are actually on the same page. They both teach that real faith will be demonstrated by our actions. If we want Jesus to come and make Himself at home in our hearts, then we need to have the kind of faith that results in obeying His teachings and the leadings of the Holy Spirit. If we do this, God will accomplish what is the very best for us, even when we can’t see how that can be. Here’s how Jesus put it: "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (John 14: 23) If we want Jesus to come and make His home with us, then we need to trust him enough to obey His teachings. That means when someone wrongs me, instead of trying to get revenge, I forgive and pray for the other person. It means that when I have the desire to engage in a relationship outside of marriage, I refrain from doing so, because I want to obey Jesus. It means that I don’t worry continually about my material needs because God has promised to provide them for me.

We have great power at our disposal if we will but trust and obey. What Paul is describing is truly magnificent, and beyond our present comprehension. Our destiny is to “be filled with all the fulness of God.” (v.19) This is an absolutely staggering promise and one we should hold on to dearly. Let’s end with Paul’s words.

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.”

In the Name...