

Sermon – March 24th

I was only a girl when Apollos arrived in Ephesus, my home town. Town? Ephesus was known as “the Treasure House of Asia” because of its importance in the Roman Empire's trade. We were most proud of the great Temple of the fertility goddess Artemis, which later generations would name as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. We worshiped Artemis as our Creator, as the goddess who protected us and blessed us. As long as I had been alive, my parents and other adults had taught me to honor her and to never behave in a way that would incur her wrath. And then something happened to change my life and the lives of others in Ephesus forever. The man named Apollos was the one who brought this change.

Apollos was a Jew from the Egyptian city of Alexandria. He began to preach in the local synagogue about a Jew named Jesus and His message. His

message was so unusual that several people in town, including my parents, went to hear him. We became convinced that this Jesus he spoke about was someone we wanted to know more about. There were not many – perhaps only about 12 adults - who became believers. Apollos soon left Ephesus and went on to Corinth to share his message. I have heard that he spoke of the encouragement and support of our small community when he was in Corinth.

Soon after Apollos left, a friend and fellow believer named Paul came to us for a second visit – the first had been brief, and he had been gone for awhile. It was then that we really began to understand what Jesus's message of God's coming kingdom on the earth was all about. Paul lived and worked with us in Ephesus for three years – more than in any other city he visited. As the local Jewish community began to reject what he had to say and spoke critically of “the Way” he taught about, he began to teach in a local teacher's hall, and began to

meet with much success. I was too young to understand much of what he taught. It was only later, after he had been gone from us and I grew more mature that I truly began my journey on “the Way.” You see, Paul wrote a letter to us, and gave it to our elders, and they brought it back to us. It was a heart-to-heart talk about his ministry among us, and a warning about what would happen if ambition and selfishness began to get in our way. He reminded us of our duty to care for the church of God, to protect it from attacks from the outside and temptation from the inside.

Listen to some of his instructions, because I believe they are as much for you today as they were for us back then: (4:24 – 5:2)

The letter ended by saying that he would see us no more. We wept with grief at the thought of never being with Paul again. We loved him so much – he changed

our lives. But what amazing words! What a difference they came to make in the life of our community! These were not the made-up words of a goddess made of stone, but the words of a man who spoke for a living God. We realized that these words – along with the rest of his letter – were a guidebook for living the life of a new person, created in God's likeness.

But it was Paul's words about the character of God's love that touched my heart most deeply.

Listen to Paul's prayer: *"I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power ... to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."*

I knew a little something about roots, since I loved flowers and herbs. I know that you have several people in your Sardis community who are wonderful at growing

beautiful gardens. I knew how to plant each seed at the right depth, making sure they were deep enough that they could grow a strong root system and survive the wind that often uprooted plants with shallow roots. I knew that then they needed to be tended with care, and weeded and nourished. I could see what Paul meant by wanting the roots of our soul to be rooted deeply in the love of God.

And to be filled with the fullness of God! Just think how that could change your behavior toward others. No longer would you reflect our human frailty, our shallow hurts and bitterness, our resentments at the unfairness of life which we all experience. Instead, you could become blind conduits to sheer love and acceptance and kindness.

Impossible? Too much of a dream? You are too set in your ways to change your behavior? God can't love you into change because you're too hopeless, you've hurt

God so much that you don't feel worthy? Hear the words God speaks to you, just as he spoke to his Son at the Jordan River: "You are my child, my beloved, with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11 cf).

These words remind us that God's acceptance is not dependent upon our performance. God loves us for who we are, not what we have done. Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. God proclaimed at your baptism, "You are my son, you are my daughter, you are my beloved. I love you!" May you have the power, Paul wrote, "to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ."

One story that reflects this love is about little Willie, the smallest child of a farming family in your 1940s. They had just enough money to survive. One time through the mother's careful saving, they had an extra dollar. She sent it into the Sears Roebuck catalog for their first luxury, a small mirror. When it arrived, each family

member looked at it. When it got to Willie he gasped in horror. His face was full of scars. As an infant he had been bitten by a dog. As a toddler he had been kicked in the head by a horse. He looked at his mother: "Mama, did you know I looked like this all along?" "Yes, Willie, I knew." "And you still loved me?" "Yes, of course I loved you, Willie, and I do love you, and I will always love you, because you are mine. You are mine!"

There are times when I look at the scars of my sinfulness and I have to ask the Lord: "Can you love me the way I am? Even though I neglect you and come to you only at my convenience?" And then in the solitude of my prayers I hear him whisper, "Yes, I love you. I love you because you are mine."

As one preacher put it: "There is nothing you can do to make God love you. There is nothing you can do to make God stop loving you." And through the power available to us through the Holy Spirit, we can be loved into action to share this love of God.

For this reason I kneel before the Father ... and I

pray that he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now glory be to God who, by God's mighty power at work within us is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope.

My friend Becky knows that because she is a divorced, remarried woman, ordained by God to the gospel ministry through a church that was then Southern Baptist. If that isn't more than she ever thought possible, it's awfully close!

May God be given glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever through endless ages. Amen!

