

Preached by Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
July 26, 2009

Ephesians 3: 14–21

WHO IS IN CHARGE?

I have a book on my book shelf. It's one that I kept out of the library that I've stored. The book is titled, *Raising a Son*. It's a blue book, and beside it there's another one that says, *Raising a Daughter*. In the little blue book, the author asserts there are three essentials every child needs to know. They need to know (1) Who is in charge?; (2) What are the rules?; and (3) What are the consequences of breaching or breaking those rules?

It really is pretty simple when you think about it. Three questions which must be answered before developing individuals can begin to take on a sense of being themselves. Three bits of reality essential for growth, for being rooted, Paul says, into an existence which grows into something which is worthy—which God will, in fact, make even more profound. Paul answers all three of these questions in this short reading for today. Questions about how we are to go about this transformation from spiritual childhood into being spiritually mature.

I fear that, for many, being obeyed in the faith is a badge of courage, but we all must grow up in Christ. Paul puts it this way: "There is one father, one parent, from whom every nation has received love." And we receive strength from this parent, our heavenly father. Strength to learn through trial and error, but always from picking ourselves up and dusting ourselves off in God's grace—strength to learn to behave like God's children—born of God's spirit.

Paul says we're planted and built up with the same power which was at work in Christ. Only because our father is in charge, we learn the important lessons of growing up as Christians. Because God is in charge, we have to acknowledge that our strength comes from God by placing us together—putting us in this family. So often people believe that they have selected their church family; when, in fact, it is the Holy Spirit which has drawn us together, which knits us into one family.

Our experiences in Christ makes us aware of the width and length and the height and the depth of our commitment to one another born of God's commitment to us. We are, Paul says, to know the unknowable. How do you know the unknowable? Paul says we experience it in the full measure of God's love in the community rather than through simply thinking about it. How long have we as Presbyterians practiced what essentially says: if we learn enough, then we can be faithful. If we just think hard enough, God can make us into what God wants us to become.

But it's not contemplation. It is life together, accepting one another's generosity, like a great tablecloth laid down on the ground with everything you could possibly want through shared community. Remember Paul is offering these rules from his cell. Either he is writing them himself or he is sharing them with a devoted student. But whatever is happening in Ephesians, Paul is certainly chained to a prison wall.

So the rules are no matter where we are, we are still free in Christ. No matter what our circumstances, we are still at liberty to be and become what God is calling us to become. So God is in charge, and we have been set free and there are really only two consequences for breaching that liberation. We either live by the power of God and remain at liberty to be Christ to one another, or we reject God's liberating freedom and choose instead to live only by our own set of rules—our own goodness, our own limited understanding of what God is doing in our midst—and in the process, our prison becomes maximum security.

We're not just chained to a wall of self, but our jailor is our own lack of faith. Our job is not to possess God's power. Rather, our task is to live within the power of God all around us. Somehow, it's all too easy to believe that God is calling us into a relationship, and God is saying "Here, I'll show you how. Now you go and do that which I have shown you in Christ."

Isn't that kind of what we have distilled down our faith to be? I'll show you how, God says, and now you go do it. Sounds enticing. Sounds simple enough. In fact, what God is saying is, "You make the attempt. You take the risk, and then I will show you. You take the leap toward faith, and I promise always to be there to catch you and to lift you up by my strength."

There's a famous Dominican monk who once wrote, "God must do it and we must undergo it." We don't live that way, do we? We're always about doing faith. And what Paul wants us to understand is that life is meant to be a great celebration, not of what we want to be doing, but of what God is doing, and in the process, what we are becoming. But we usually see our church experiences as the exact opposite. We want the power to do, and we like God as an abstract—something that is to be out there. We want the power in ourselves which we can manipulate and control and manage and task, but all the while God is unwilling to be abstract in our lives. God wants to be center stage.

God demands to be in charge. The rules are simple. God's presence is concrete. God is tangible here and now. And this concrete existence—this genuine tangible presence of the Holy has to be lived out in our lives together, overcoming our natural tendencies to be divisive and hurtful, to be secure and isolated. If you look at your life—at your circumstances—I believe you will find most of your struggles come from keeping those you love the most at arms length. Because when we embrace those that we care the most about, we have to be willing to let them be themselves, not what we want them to be.

I think God is calling us to risk the full measure of God's love in community. I think God is offering us two consequences: To either be chained to Christ, which is true liberation; or we can be enslaved to ourselves and apart from Christ, which is the worst form of being incarcerated, for we are the loneliest when we deny Christ access to our relationship.

Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor preached on this passage once, and when she had finished, a man came out and told her that he was going home to sell his house, to liquidate his assets and to live in a new way. Rev. Taylor told him, "It was just a sermon; you might want to have a cup of coffee. Think about this overnight."

But it does become just that concrete, doesn't it? The word that became flesh and dwelt among us. The word that beamed through the Upper Room and set believers hearts on fire. The word that is still loose in a world that will never be able to contain it. This word is still calling us, seeking those who will hear it, those who will speak it to one another courageously. A word that raises the dead, a word that says "Let it be in our midst according to God's will." This is the word God has sent. Take it home with you. Allow it to redefine your priorities and all your commitments.

In Christ our Lord; so may it be. Amen.