

Alive: Spirit of Love – Loving God

Ephesians 3:14-21

Jason Kramme

I still remember the day I went to college. It was a Saturday morning in September of 2003, and we were sitting on the lawn of Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa. It was hot, bright, and we were surrounded by all of the other freshman and their parents for a ceremonial beginning of our journey.

After some songs and speeches, the real work, or the real transition, I should say, began. The president of the college came to the podium and invited all of the incoming freshman to stand up, form a line behind the faculty, and away they led us, through the arches in front of the campus, leaving parents, grandparents, and youth behind.

For those of us that walked through the arches that day, it was a dramatic moment of becoming. If you ask my mom, however, it was torture watching them parade us off like that, no chance for a goodbye.

If you ask my dad about that moment, I don't think he would say much at all. I guess I know that because I've asked. I think that to get into his experience of that day would have meant feeling what he felt. I've tried to do that many times over the last 19 years. I've felt the ache he felt. I've felt the pride he felt. I've felt the fear he felt.

Now as a dad with two kids of my own, I've had mini moments where I've held those feelings close while I've let my children go out into the world. Today we are gathered around a goodbye letter of sorts from Paul to his spiritual children in the city of Ephesus. I think he puts into words what so many of us have had caught in our throats as we have said goodbye to our kids, loved ones, and some stages of life.

As we think about how to apply this letter to our lives today, to our transitions, I think there are three two-sided lessons. That is, sometimes we are the sender and sometimes we are the sent. Since it is Father's Day, I'm going to use stories about fathers and my own story as a father to illustrate each point. Even if you are

not a dad, I think you'll be able to find yourself in the work.

Who is my family now?

When I walked through the arches that day, I was led to a pre-determined gathering spot where I met a cohort of people that would journey with me throughout my freshman year. I remember that as we were meeting each other, the upper classmen representative from the admissions office said that we would be like a family. It was then that I thought of my family that had literally dropped me off that morning for the first time. I realized I didn't say goodbye, I realized I missed them. I realized I didn't know any of these people around me, so how could they be my family?!

The early church in Ephesus, and even the disciples that Jesus called together, had to wrestle with the question of family. I've always thought it interesting that we get almost nothing of the moment of leaving from the perspective of the disciples' families. Did their moms cry? Did their dads look on stoically? Did their siblings feel confused? Were their friends upset that this vital part of their family was leaving? Before we go any further, let's read from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3, verses 14-21.

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family 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.

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

I remember the first time I dropped my son, Emil, off at our preschool, Child Development & Learning Center (CDLC), right around the corner. If you don't know the way drop-off works is that each morning, all

the parents line up in their cars, and as you get to the door, one of the teachers helps your kiddo out of the car. Now, it was an interesting moment where, going into it I was excited for this new chapter in Emil's story, but there was a split second where I looked into the rearview mirror and his eyes caught mine and I got that rush of, "I'm giving away my child!" That may be a little overdramatized, but it was something like it. Anyway, at that point I didn't trust anyone but me to be his family. How could anyone love him like me? How could anyone understand him like me? He is my little guy.

He must have known or felt what I was feeling because at the exact moment I had that flood of emotions, he got a look of panic as the car door opened and one of the teachers reached in to scoop him out. Before I knew it, he was gone, my car was empty, and I was being waved on, just like all the other crying parents in their mini vans.

Jesus goes to great lengths to share with people the way in which the one who first called our babies "child" was God. Not us. That's big news. How can we read Psalm 139 and doubt it? How can we read John 3:16 and doubt it? So for you senders out there, know that your family is part of a family already and for as much as you are sending your child, your loved one to the next place, phase, or stage of life, their Father in heaven is going with them. And for you being sent. Know that in the family of God that for every goodbye there is a hello, because God has always been going to prepare a place for us, to prepare the way for us, so you never go alone. These same Ephesians would come to be known as brothers and sisters in Christ, they were family. So, as you look around at the people in your new place, may you see family.

Who knows me?

Around Prince of Peace we use a personality inventory called the Enneagram. There are nine types of personalities, all with their own strategies for earning love and making their way in the world. I am a type three. One of the things that I do often to earn love and acceptance is figure out what the group around us wants from me and then I give it right back to them. I can chameleon with the best of them.

That is the feeling I got in that freshman round-up nearly 20 years ago. It was a rush of "I can be anyone!" and "No one really knows me!" Talk about being pulled on either end emotionally! The early church was on the move. Disciples and later apostles were always on

the move from one community to another community, and the question of identity was important for the families and communities that sent their loved one and for the person that was sent. Think about it: in the ancient world, if you're one of the disciples, and you grew up in the ancient world in a fishing family, your entire world was fishing. You were a fisherman. When you were sent to go follow this Jesus by your family and Jesus talked about what it would be like, as that sending family, it would have been a disorienting experience because YOU KNOW what you know about the person leaving you. On the other side of the coin, as the one being sent, there is this moment that I had where anything is possible for who you are and can be... and that is the blessing and the curse of it all: anything is possible: what does that make you?

Paul says this in verse 16 and 17, *"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, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love."* Paul knows what Jesus was up to and is continuing the work. We get Jesus' vision for his work in John chapter 1:15, where he says that the end goal is for people to be their Child of God Self. In other words, to get in touch with their inner being. That version that God knew in Psalm 139. The fearfully and wonderfully made version. The "in the light" version. The Kingdom of God version.

One of the things that always gives me pause when I send my kids anywhere is that I believe I know them better than anyone else does or ever could. I know their mannerisms. I know their personality. I know their heart. I think what I and the rest of us sending our loved ones to the next phase of life need to hear is that God knows them, too. More than that, God is drawing them into who they are becoming. That is work that I, all of us senders, need to do. Maybe another way of putting it is like this: we are always co-parenting with God. We are always co-friending with God. We are not the only ones with a front row seat to the people we love. God knows them and is doing us even better than that by not letting them stay in the same version of themselves that they've always been.

It would be an understatement to say that I did some growing in college. It would be an understatement to say that I grew up in seminary and that I became a better version of me after becoming a husband and a father. Each time I've been sent into a new phase of life, God has surprised me and met me in that moment

and drawn me even deeper into who God knows I can be. My parents and siblings get a new and improved version of me on the regular. So for those of you entering into a new phase and stage of life, God knows you. Has counted the hairs on your head and also knows who you can become and is inviting you in that journey through unfailing love. The key for both sides of the relationship is faith. Trusting that the One that began a good work, of giving us an identity, will bring it to completion.

The fullness of love

Paul says in verses 18 and 19: *I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*"

There's a great quote that says something like, "Effective change is letting people down at a rate they can tolerate." Some months after my parents dropped me off at Simpson, I was standing in my dorm room with a test I had just gotten back from biology. Another F. I was struggling with my classes and not really due to the content of the course, but because of the content of my heart at the time. Remember how I said that I was sort of shaken by the blue ocean of possibility for who I could be at school? The way that worked itself out was by overcommitting and partying excessively. I was tired, hungover, and failing. Which made me feel terrible, just filled with shame.

Shame is one of those emotions that a lot of us feel where the basic idea is a little different than feeling guilt. In guilt you feel like you have done something wrong. With shame, you feel like you are something wrong. And that is how I felt. I felt like I couldn't tell my friends because I was embarrassed and I didn't want to tell my parents because I was letting them down. So I called my sister. I said, "Leah, I'm failing biology. (Which is rough because I was a biology major.) I don't know what I'm going to do." My sister, aside from usually having brilliant advice, is also fiercely in my corner. That call ended with, "You're going to be okay, and I love you no matter what."

More than anything else, when you hit a moment in life when you're sending a loved one – a child, a spouse, a sibling, a friend – away to a new thing, you want them to know that they are loved no matter what. It's this feeling of wanting to almost distill your love into a physical form they can take with them. You want to give them your heart so they'll always know.

And you want to do that because you know they'll get into a hard spot. They'll fail some tests. They'll be hungover. They'll be in over their heads and you won't be there to tell them how much you love them. Let's read those verses again: *I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*" Friends, the same as your love goes with your loved ones, so does the love of God.

On the other side of the relationship when you are in that valley, it can feel unbelievably disorienting. And it is why these words from Paul are so important because they remind us that higher than the mountains we face, deeper than the valleys and the pain, in the middle of what feels like a hole in our chest where our heart and identity should be, one thing remains and that is the love of God. To lift us. To heal us. To fill us. I think there is a moment in every single dorm room, new rental, office space, relationship, where we search for that kind of love. Well, the good news is that in the same way it was there for the Ephesians, in the same way it was there for me at Simpson College, it is there for you. In the places you are sent. So, may you grasp that love...the height, the depth, the fullness of it.