

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Alleluia People: Audacious Dreams”

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Psalm 25:4-10

Ephesians 3:14-21

One wanted to be a doctor. Several others wanted to be police officers or soldiers. A couple wanted to be famous singers and at least three wanted to be teachers. Under normal circumstances these would be ordinary dreams for a group of first graders. These are the kinds of dreams we want all our children to have. And by children I don't just mean our biological children. I mean, all children. We want all children to reach their fullest potential. Yet for these first graders these are audacious dreams. These are audacious dreams because these are the dreams of the children I tutor at Alcott Elementary School in Pontiac. They are audacious because most of these children live below the poverty line and in a district that has just a 46% graduation rate. These are audacious dreams because these children are trying to learn in overcrowded, understaffed and underfunded classrooms. So, what we might ask ourselves is just how realistic are the audacious dreams of these children?

This morning we could ask the same thing of the Apostle Paul's audacious dreams for the church at Ephesus. His dream for this church, whose members he considers to be his children, is that they are “...*able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine...*” That is a remarkable dream; to be able to accomplish far more than even Paul can ask or imagine. It is remarkable because the church at Ephesus was not in a place to do much of anything. Let me explain. Ephesus was the second largest and most important city in the Roman Empire. It was technologically advanced with storm water and sewage drainage. It had stone streets and massive villas. It was also home to the Temple of Artemis or Diana. The temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. People came from across the empire to worship there. Silversmiths made their living by selling small statues of Artemis to tourists (yes, some things never change). The church, on the other hand was a small, and I mean small, group of people, who had no power and no influence. They had no grand temple and were telling a story about a Jewish carpenter who had been executed as a traitor to Rome. And their story that he had been raised from the dead, was for most Greeks, simply absurd. So why is it that Paul thought that this church could live out this audacious dream? The answer is because it was a supernatural, alleluia community that was rooted and grounded in the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Ephesus was a supernatural, alleluia community. What I mean by that is that Ephesus was not simply another social organization or business collective. In the Roman Empire there were a wide variety of social organizations. There were guilds which oversaw various trades such as silversmithing and tentmaking. There were secret religious societies that carried out rituals into which one had to be invited. But the church was neither of those. The church was an alleluia community called together by and empowered through the Holy Spirit. We see this when Paul prays that the church will be strengthened in its inner being with power through the Spirit. What this means is that the church is not solely dependent

on its own inner resources to accomplish more than Paul can ask or imagine. The church is fueled by the very Spirit of God which not only confirms the faith of those alleluia people, but also pushes them out into the world with a message of hope, compassion and care. The Spirit grants them the courage to invite others to be part of the community and gives them the confidence they need to stand against those who would persecute them. They were a supernatural community.

Ephesus was also a community rooted and grounded in the love of God in Jesus Christ. We know that in this world there are forces that shape individuals and societies. Some shape them for the worse and some for the better. Hate, violence, anger and revenge shape society for the worse by tearing it apart. On the other hand, love is the power that can bind the world together into the creation God desires it to be. This is the love that is at the heart of the church at Ephesus. I love what Paul uses to describe this love. First, he uses the image of tree roots. I am not sure how many of you have been traveling in the forest and have seen a tree with shallow roots that has toppled over. This is not Paul's image. He imagines roots reaching deep into the earth and drawing spiritual nutrients from Christ; nutrients that create a loving community. The second image he offers is that of being grounded on Christ's love. This image is the image of Jesus' love being a solid foundation for a large building. For those in Ephesus, this would be a powerful image because of the foundation for the Temple to Artemis. In a sense the church's foundation is better and longer lasting. Thus for Paul, this love that fuels and supports the church is what changes hearts and builds communities in which individuals can live into their full, God-given potential. They are a community rooted and grounded in God's love in Jesus Christ.

So, what about us? What about Everybody's Church? What does it mean for us to be a supernatural, alleluia community, that is rooted and grounded in love? I ask that because that is indeed what we are. We are not simply a group of people who happen to get together on Sunday mornings. We are an alleluia community that is chosen by God, empowered by the Spirit and rooted and grounded in love so that we can welcome all people. As such we too are to have our audacious dreams. We are to have our dreams of doing more than others can think or imagine. Over the years there have been dreams. Baldwin House, the first low income housing in Birmingham, a dream of Lois Poston. Another is the Faith Community Coalition on Foster Care, a dream of Kate Thoresen that supports children, youth and families in the foster care system. A third, is our adoption of Alcott Elementary School. This was the dream of my predecessor L.P. Jones and Kathy Nyberg. And all of these dreams are worth continuing because they are an extension of our Spirit-driven loving community.

This morning then, I want to offer you a two-part challenge. The first is to share your audacious dreams with us. I say this because I know that many of you are involved in other audacious movements of the Spirit here and abroad. Share them with us so that we might share them with others. Second, choose a dream and engage. Choose to become engaged in Faith Communities for Foster Care, or Alcott, because, as I noted at the beginning of my sermon, there is a need for loving, alleluia people in both ministries in order that the audacious dreams of these children, youth and families, whether it is at Alcott or in Foster Care, become realities. So ask yourselves this question, "How am I helping audacious dreams come true as a member of this supernatural alleluia community that is rooted and grounded in the love of God in Jesus Christ.