

## My Penny

Sermon 107 | Greystone Baptist Church | July 25, 2021  
Ephesians 3:14-21

Today's New Testament reading comes from the middle of the book of Ephesians. It is an ancient letter in which the author borrows from hymns and scripture to weave together, in beautiful language, a vision for the church. It is, in many ways, a poetic strategic plan, so to speak. And as many *good* strategic planners and visionary leaders do, the author of this text begins by affirming the past, reminding the people about the good work that God *has already done* in Ephesus and through the community of Jesus followers who have gathered there.

*Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" ... remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (Ephesians 2: 11-12)*

*But now, in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us. (Ep. 2:13-14)*

This reminder about the bringing together of Jew and Gentile is a reminder to the Ephesians that their unity, their very existence as a church, is nothing short of a miracle. What now seems so obvious to us – that Gentiles should be included into the fellowship of Christ followers – was as controversial as some of the most divisive issues in Christian history. It really ranks right up there with issues like dancing, drinking, and ordaining women to serve as deacon or pastor. And you'd better believe, there were verses of scripture that could be interpreted to support these divinely ordained divisions. There were people with strong convictions and opinions on all sides of the "unity with the Gentiles" issue. This mission of Paul's, this dream of a church that could bring Jew and Gentile together as one was a difficult calling, to say the least.

It bore similarities to some of the biggest church challenges in the past and it even bears the marks of our current conflicts like whether to prioritize ministries online or in person, whether or not to engage in the work of justice and advocacy, and whether to work toward the full understanding, inclusion, and affirmation of people with all sexual orientations and gender identities.

The example the author is citing from the past is a big one. The divisions about which he is speaking are real, they are raw, they are ripe for conflict, and yet he uses the experience of moving through them to build his case for a unified church built on the foundation of God's unbelievably expansive love.

*Remember that you were once Gentiles... he begins.*

I've been listening to a new podcast series lately called: *This is love*. It's a story-based series that reminds listeners that despite all the *bad* news there is in the world... love is still happening. Each episode features one love story – and it isn't always about romantic love or even humans for that matter! There's even an episode about rare snails! But each story is unique, surprising, and uplifting. These have been important reminders to me – lately – that love does indeed live on.

One of my favorite episodes begins in Denver with a press conference held in October of 2006. The man at the microphone called the press conference so he could ask anyone watching if they could tell him who he was or how he got there. He'd been picked up on the streets of Denver and taken to the hospital to recover from the rough days and nights on the street. When he came to, he didn't know anything about his past: who he was, where he'd come from, or where he belonged. He had no recollection of family or friends, he was lost – in the truest sense of the word.

You see, Jeff suffered from a rare psychiatric disorder called, dissociative fugue, which causes people to suddenly and without warning forget everything and to leave home and travel without knowledge or plans of where they might go, how they might go, or what they might do when they get there. They just up and leave. Episodes are often triggered by stress, and when they come, the person experiencing them has to re-learn everything.

This time, he was found in Denver after leaving his house (and Fiancée, Penny) in Olympia, Washington to visit a friend who was dying of cancer. He left his house that morning planning to head north but he never made it to his destination and no one heard from him for months. It was as if he'd vanished into thin air.

The press conference in Denver didn't produce any strong leads but his story was picked up by Good Morning America where he had a nationwide platform. It was there he was spotted by Penny's brother who quickly called Penny to say, "I've found Jeff! He's on the TV right now, turn it on!"<sup>1</sup>

Penny reached out to the authorities and arranged to meet Jeff at the Seattle airport. He was escorted there by Denver police, just to ensure that Penny was indeed who she said she was and that she wasn't there to take advantage of Jeff in a moment of weakness. At the airport, Penny ran straight to Jeff and threw her arms around him. Jeff remembers the moment just standing there as she hugged him. In that moment he remembers feeling confused that there was somebody who knew him, somebody who cared for him, somebody who was *for* him, somebody with whom he belonged.

After that embrace, Penny knew exactly what to do. She'd known about Jeff's diagnosis for most of the time she'd known him, so she immediately began telling him the stories of his past, helping him to re-create the memories of family, friends, and the love that they shared. Through stories and pictures, Penny helped Jeff remember who he was.

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<sup>1</sup> insert footnote here.

As the story continues Jeff describes the extent to which Penny is committed to him, always loving him, always ready to help him remember the things he likes and dislikes. She knows the stories of his past and can help him fill in the gaps when the past needs to inform the present. She is his past, present, and future. And the love that she offers is one that most of us could not even imagine.

It is patient. How many times will this happen? How many times will she have to remember for him, the stories and events of his past?

It is risky. Who's to say that next time an episode comes, Jeff won't be able to accept her explanation of who he is and what is happening.

And it is vulnerable. Penny's whole heart is committed to someone who will forget her name, her face, their relationship, and even the love that they share.

In choosing Jeff, Penny opens herself to a kind of pain, loneliness, and sadness that very few people could ever understand.

As I listened to this episode, to Penny and Jeff's story, I couldn't help but try to put myself in Penny's shoes, to ask... if this were me, could I love like she loves? If Jeff were my person, could I bear the pain of not knowing where my person was, whether or not they were ok, if I would ever see them again and if I did... if they would accept the truth and eventually grow to love me in return? I'm not sure what the answer to those questions might be...

As I listened more, I couldn't help but think about how our tendency may be to put ourselves in Penny's shoes, but how we can also be a lot like Jeff when it comes to our relationship with God.

How many of us have at one time or another developed a sort of *amnesia* and disappeared from our spiritual lives for a certain amount of time.

Often there are external stressors that initiate our disappearances. Divorce, loss, illness, a series of bad luck or disappointments come and we feel abandoned or ignored by God because our prayers are not being answered in the ways that we would like.

Other times we give in to feelings of worthlessness and we believe the lie that we are not good enough, not beautiful enough, not strong enough, not smart enough, not successful enough, not faithful enough, for anyone – especially God – to love us.

Most often, we just get busy with all of our commitments. Work, family, exercise, meal planning and preparation, doctor's appointments, errands to run, and even planning time away from it all takes precedence over our calendars and before we know it *life* has gotten in the way, taken over, and we become absentee partners in our life of faith... in our relationship with God.

It's almost as if we develop a sort of "spiritual amnesia."

Sometimes we are aware of what is happening. We can see ourselves pulling away from church, from Sunday schools and small groups where we nurture our faith, we stop reading the Bible and stop expecting God to show up in our lives.

Other times we are unaware, perhaps because we are still going through the motions of faith, we're still going to church, we're still doing the mission projects, we're still checking the things off the list (so to speak) with God, but we're not really in it, not really listening, not really open to growth or change, just sort of stagnant, checked out, and essentially absent.

When these episodes come, we are sort of like Jeff Ingram, waking up in Denver wondering: Who have we become? How did we get here? Is there anybody who can help us find the way home?

Listening to Jeff and Penny's story, once I began to see myself, to see ourselves in Jeff, it became so beautifully clear that Penny's love is a reflection of God's love for each and every one of us.

Despite the possibility, perhaps even the probability, that we will disappear at times, wander off and forget who we are, God is always there, ready to love us, ready to embrace us, ready to remind us of who we were created to be.

And I think as we remember that very simple, very basic reality, we will inevitably expand in our knowledge and understanding of who God is and how God loves us all – those who are like us, and those who are different from us.

Perhaps this is what the author of the Ephesian letter was trying to do when he started with "Remember". *Remember that you were once Gentiles...* Remember that your journey started with love and from that love you grew roots and we built this church... Remember that there was controversy, there were deep divisions among us, but *remember* that through that experience of God's love, all of that has been overcome so that in you and through you, God's love might grow.

You see Paul, the founder of so many of the earliest churches, the apostle to the Gentiles, the author of so many of our New Testament letters had a bold vision for a church that never stopped expanding in God's love, a church that pushed the boundaries of who was invited, who was welcomed, and who was worthy of full participation in the church which was the body of Christ in the world. And Paul knew that this vision, this calling was so bold that folks would struggle to accept it. But if he could just help them remember that they were all "aliens in a foreign land," human beings, imperfect and in need of God's grace and yet that they were somehow, miraculously loved by a God who was always ready to embrace them in love and remind them of who they were: "Beloved" ... Paul

believed that if they (if we) could just remember that it all starts with love, this vision for the church was possible.

It makes me wonder if there is a wider expression of God's love, a bold vision for *this* church in *our* time, a vision and calling that is rooted in the profound experience of God's love for us, and for all of creation?

Maybe if we wish to remember that love,  
to rediscover our calling,  
and to re-imagine our church for our future together,  
we might begin by praying the Ephesian prayer today, and every day, as we ask God to help us ... remember.

Loving God,  
We bow before you this day asking that you might help us remember that you love us.  
We pray that you might strengthen us in our inner most being, with the power of the Spirit.  
That Christ may dwell in our hearts as we are being rooted and grounded in love.  
Give us the power to comprehend what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth...  
And we ask to know your love, the love of Christ, in new ways that expand our human minds so much that we might be filled with the fullness of your love.

Now and forevermore,

Amen.