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**Pentecost 10 with reading from Pentecost 9
Ephesians 3**

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Salem, Bridgeport**

“Christ in You”

A Lutheran pastor friend of mine died a few weeks ago.
Carl Sharon was the Lutheran campus pastor at Yale for decades,
and also served as the dean of the Greater New Haven conference for many years.
When he was dean he would always start off our pastors’ text study
by going around the room and asking each person, “What’s on top?”

And that’s how I’d like us to start off today.
So let me ask you, “What’s on top?”
What’s on the front burner of your mind? What feeling is filling your heart? What’s on top?”
Just take half a minute to answer that question for yourself....

And now I’d like you to take whatever that is –
a fear, a worry, a concern, a challenge, a resentment, a joy, a thanksgiving – & set it aside for a few minutes.
We’ll take it up again later.

But for now let’s turn to scripture.
Before we get to our focus today on the book of Ephesians, chapter 3, let me set it in context.

When God first created humans, God created them in God’s own image for one reason –
to have an intimate relationship with them – a relationship based on love,
a relationship depicted in Genesis as walking together in the garden and talking.
But humans were tempted away from this relationship of trust between Creator and created,
and instead wanted control of their own lives.

Time and time again throughout the Old Testament,
God gives people things to do to bring them back into relationship,
but most of the time, people end up focusing on the things themselves
instead of letting those things draw them into the relationship God desires.

Then came Jesus who actually figures out that it’s not about the things that people do; it’s about the relationship.
Jesus puts his relationship with God first and teaches others to do the same.
That relationship is at the root of his life and everything he does grows out of that root.
He even goes as far as to say, “God and I are one. I am in God and God is in me”.
And he continues saying to his disciples, “And I am in you and you are in me and so we are one.
And because I am one with God and one with you, you are one with God.”

That’s what Paul was talking about in today’s reading when he says,
*¹⁶I 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, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith*

But what does that mean? What does it mean for Christ to live in our hearts?
There’s a little devotional book written the year I was born that I was given in high school
called My Heart – Christ’s Home by Robert Munger. [© 1954 by Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship of the USA]
It’s a short story in which a man talks about inviting Christ into his heart.

He pictures his heart as a home.
At first invites Christ into the study, then later into the dining room, then the living room and the workroom,
the rec room, the bedroom, the family room, the kitchen, and finally the hall closet.
Each room represents an area of the man’s life that Christ works with him on transforming.
After Christ has inspired him to clean up his house, he realizes that it’s just too much to keep up on his own.
No sooner does he get a few rooms clean, then the first one is dirty again.
So he finally asks Christ if maybe he would be willing to manage the whole house for him.
Christ responds that he’d love to, that that is exactly what he came there to do,
because it is simply impossible for anyone to be a Christian in their own strength.
The only thing that makes it possible is for Christ to do it in and for the person.

This is exactly what Paul is trying to say in our lesson for today when he talks about Christ dwelling in our hearts. It's what Paul had experienced.

Before he met Christ on the road to Damascus, he tried to serve God,
but in actuality he was doing the exact opposite of God's will because he didn't KNOW God,
and he wasn't hearing God's voice, or following where God led.

For Saul it was all about the doing, all about the tasks, all about the "what and the how"
until the day he had a personal encounter with the risen Lord.

That changed his life and from that point on for Paul it's all about his relationship with Christ.

That relationship is central to his life, the focal point, the root from which he grows.

Paul had learned that there are 2 ways to get out of bed in the morning –

we can wake up and start planning what it is we want to do that day, or we can wake up and say,

"Good morning, God! What's on the agenda for the day? What would you have me do?"

And it was as he learned to live in that second way that Paul was able to accomplish so much.

Let me explain. The overarching mission that God gave Paul was to spread the news of the gospel to the world.

His call was to be a missionary, to plant churches. And Paul did that. But then he ends up in prison

and for 2 years he can no longer accomplish his mission in the way he had been doing it.

I can just imagine the conversation he had with God.

"Okay, God, I'm in prison. I'm supposed to be planting churches.

Are you going to get me out of prison so I can get on with the mission?"

And then God makes it clear to Paul that he's not getting out of prison right away

but there's another way to accomplish his mission.

He can write letters to the churches he had already founded.

Now Paul might have thought that writing letters was a poor substitute for going out & planting new churches.

But God could see what Paul could not.

God could see that in the long term Paul's letters would be even more important than founding other churches,

because those letters would be what would continue to proclaim the gospel down through the ages – clear to us today.

If Paul had never written those letters, the churches he founded would likely have forgotten

all about the person who founded them and all about the original mission.

I mean how many of you know who the first pastor of Salem was?

I know it was Pastor Johnson because his picture is hanging in the lounge, but I have no idea what he preached.

The point is that God knew how to use the good times and the bad times in Paul's life to the fullest advantage.

And even though Paul couldn't always see how things would work out,

he trusted God enough to allow God to work in him and through him to accomplish God's will.

And not only was Paul able to accomplish God's will,

Paul was able to do it with a spirit of praise and thanksgiving and gratitude and joy.

Sometimes it feels like we're all alone and Christ is outside of our lives.

But whenever Christ is outside, know that he stands at the door and knocks.

And when we allow him in, when we allow him access to all the rooms in our heart, to all areas of our lives,

we no longer have to face the fears and the doubts and the challenges alone.

Even when it seems like we're stuck in a prison

and not able to do the things we want to do or the things we believe God has called us to do,

the truth is that God is always at work, knowing far better than we how to get us to where God wants us.

Whatever it is that's on the top of your mind, whatever it is that's filling your heart, invite Jesus in.

Invite Jesus in to share the joys

And invite Jesus in to help you with the fears and doubts, the challenges and concerns, the hurts and struggles.

No matter what it is that your face, you don't face it alone.

Christ is there with you to lead you and guide you, to hold you and comfort you, to protect you and fight for you. And

when you allow Christ to work in you,

when you listen to what he says, & watch what he does, & follow where he leads, then amazing things will happen.

Whatever it is that is on top for you today, I pray with Paul

"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... the breadth and length and height and depth*
[of] ¹⁹the love of Christ... [and] that you may be filled with all the fullness of God

²⁰*... [who] is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.*

²¹*to that One be glory... forever and ever. Amen*