

Ephesians 3:14-21
2nd Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord
January 10, 2010

Ephesians 3:14-21 (New International Version)

A Prayer for the Ephesians

¹⁴For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵from whom his whole family^[a] in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

I'd like to begin this morning with a story that I have shared in other settings and, even perhaps, in other sermons. It bears repeating because it illustrates very clearly the point of our sermon text for today. It's a story about some pastors attending a pastors' conference at a small country church. The pastor there was a classmate who, while at the seminary, was an average student with average gifts. He wasn't a dynamic speaker nor did he have real strong people skills. But from all outward appearances, his church seemed to be thriving. There were plenty of ladies to help prepare and serve the meal for the conference. There were a number of men who ushered for the service. There were pictures on the bulletin board of the numerous families that had just joined and the many organizations and committees of the church. From the previous weeks' bulletins in the literature rack, the offerings and attendance were up. It was puzzling the pastors as to the evident blessings of their classmate's ministry. So they asked, "What's going on here? What are you doing that seems to be working in your ministry?" His answer was simple. He said, "Each week I take three or four names of families from the directory and I pray for them all during week. I pray that God would bless them and help them grow in their faith. It seems that the Lord is answering my prayers."

"I pray for my members!" Did you ever stop to think that that is what we should be doing here at St. Paul? Yes, we have our prayer chain by which members offer prayers for those in need in and outside of our church. What a blessing that is. Yes, we have our weekly intercessory prayers in church for the sick and dying, for those celebrating anniversaries and birthdays, and for the spread of the gospel. That's good and right because God said we should pray for all people. But do we ever just pray for each other that we grow in our faith and in our praise of God? That's what that pastor did for his members, that's Paul did for the members at Ephesus, and on the basis of the second reading for today that is what I want to encourage all of us to do: **PRAY FOR EACH OTHER! I. Pray that our hearts be filled with power, and II Pray that our hearts overflow with praise.**

PRAY FOR EACH OTHER!

- I. Pray that our hearts be filled with power.**
- II. Pray that our hearts overflow with praise.**

I'd like to begin the first part of my sermon by borrowing an advertisement from the field of education. Somewhere along the line I heard this stated "Knowledge is power." In a much more sanctified way that is what Paul is getting at in this prayer. The more you know about

the love of God, the stronger your faith will be. Listen again to Paul's prayer: **"14**For this reason I kneel before the Father, **15**from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. **16**I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, **17**so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, **18**may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, **19**and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

Did you notice that Paul uses that word "power" twice? "I pray that God may strengthen you with power in your inner being...and I pray that being rooted and established in love you may have power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." What does Paul mean by that? When all is said and done, it has to do with the Holy Spirit working through the power of God's Word to strengthen our faith. There's a lot of different ways to define or to illustrate what faith is. One way the fathers of our faith pictured it is with a hand. Faith is like a hand that the Holy Spirit gives us by which we hold onto to Jesus and all the things he won for our salvation. It seems that that's the way Paul is talking about faith in these verses because he prays that with faith that resides in our heart we are able with power to grasp how wide, long, high, and deep the love of Christ is.

As I hear Paul talk about the dimensions of God's love I immediately think of what the psalmist wrote: "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us." Have you ever wondered about that? How high are the heavens? How far is the east from the west? The answer is "We don't know." The point is God's love for us and his forgiveness are immeasurable. So when we pray for each other like Paul prayed for the Ephesians we are praying that we all grow in the power of our Spirit-worked faith to comprehend and to know that no matter where we are in the world, no matter how far we have fallen into sin, or how many times we have strayed from the Lord, no matter how painful the sorrow or how difficult the problem in our life, God's love is deep enough, long enough, wide enough, and high enough to reach us, to find us, to call us back to repentance, to forgive us, to comfort us, to strengthen us.

Paul adds even more. When we grow in our strength to know and believe these things about God's love, then, Paul says, we will "filled with the measure of the fullness of God." That's a challenging thought! How can we finite creatures be filled with the full measure of God? I believe that this is what Paul means: When, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, you believe what the Scriptures say about God's saving love, you are enabled to grasp the truth that in Christ Jesus you lack nothing for salvation. In Christ you have all that you need for heaven!

There are many things for which we pray for others and ourselves. Maybe it's a new job, better health, or warmer weather. God invites us to ask for such things and to be confident he will hear and answer our prayers. But whenever we ask for such earthly things, we always have to add, "Your will be done," because we don't know if God will say "Yes" or "No." What we do know is that whatever the answer is, our Father in heaven knows best. However, when it comes to spiritual things like a stronger faith, that's something we know God definitely wants us to have and he will always give it to us. But there's only one way he answers that prayer. He gives power to our hearts, to our faith through the power of his Word. So dear friends, let's pray for each that through the use of God's Word all of our hearts be filled with power!

II.

But let us also pray for each other that our hearts be overflowing with praise. The reason I chose this as the second part of my sermon is because the second part of Paul's prayer is a doxology, which is a hymn of praise. Listen to how Paul's heart overflowed with praise: **20**Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, **21**to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! "

Notably the word "power" appears in this part of Paul's prayer too. According to the power that is at work within us he is able to do more than all we can imagine or ask. Think of all the things Paul had experienced in his own life that God was able to accomplish. God not only brought Paul to faith, and even made him an apostle. According to Paul, that was unthinkable because he had been an enemy of Christ and even helped put Christians to death. For this Paul's heart overflowed with praise.

If God could do the unthinkable for Paul, the worst of sinners, certainly God can do the same for you and me who are also the chief of sinners. And what has God done for you? He kept his promise and sent his Son to be your Savior and had him do the unimaginable! He died in your place on the cross so that you could be counted not guilty! He has done even more that goes beyond our imagination! He rose from the dead and conquered the grave. He ascended into heaven and now rules all things by this power. He is there preparing a place for you. He brought you to faith. He hears and answers all your prayers. He has promised never to leave or forsake you. He has turned death into a sleep for you from which you will awaken. It all goes beyond our imagination. It's more than we could ever want or ask. We have reason for our hearts to overflow with praise.

If ever you have doubts about whether or not God has the power to do more than all you could imagine or ask, just ask the couple in the gospel reading if Jesus could do the impossible for them and turn water into wine. Just ask the 5,000 people whom Jesus fed with just a few fish and loaves of bread. Just ask the widow at Nain whose son Jesus raised from the dead. Just ask the women who found an empty tomb on Easter Sunday! In Scripture we have all the proof we need that our God is able to do more than all we could imagine or ask. How can our hearts not overflow with praise saying, "To him be glory forever and ever!"

So let's go back to the beginning. Why did that pastor pray for his members and why ought we to pray for one another? That our church and Bible class attendance increase? That our offerings increase? So that we get along better in our own families and even in our church family? That we are able to handle with more grace and dignity the ups and downs of living in a sinful world? Certainly these are all the things God wants for us and from us and it's what we want too! But when all is said and done what we really want for each other is to know how wide and long and deep and high the love of Christ is, and in knowing that love we believe that Jesus will take us to heaven when we die to praise him there forever. That's what we want for each other. So, let's pray for each! That our hearts be filled with power and that our hearts overflow with praise! Amen.