

We're going to touch very lightly on the first two-thirds of chapter three of Ephesians this morning in order to focus on the last eight verses of the chapter. A couple of the commentaries I read this week said that to get to the meat of what Paul has to say in a particular letter, you can always look to the prayers or doxologies at the beginnings and ends of the letter or sections of the letter. We've already looked at how the opening blessing or *berakah* in chapter one serves as a sort of thesis statement for Ephesians. Now, at the end of chapter three, Paul offers a prayer for the Ephesians that both sums up the preceding chapters and sets up the three chapters that follow.

Paul starts chapter three where he left off in chapter two, with the good news of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the promises and in the family of God. In fact, the first verse reads a little bit like a false start, as if he's ready to start the prayer that he finally gets to in verse 14 but distracts himself with his mention of his own imprisonment and its cause, as the Revised Standard Version puts it, "a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles." In affirming yet again that "the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Good News," Paul discusses his own understanding of his calling as one who was responsible for getting this Good News to those for whom it was meant.

So far in this letter, as you may have noticed, Paul has come back again and again to this idea of the unity of the Church, that Christians are all one family of God through Christ. Here at the beginning of our passage for the morning, he makes a pun, saying that he is going to pray to the Father (πατερ) from whom every family (πατρια) takes its name. Most commentators assume that this emphasis on family unity has something to do with the situation in the church to which Paul was writing, that there was some conflict between the Gentile and the Jewish believers. I think they are probably right, but I think there is another message here, too. Whether you want to call it divine inspiration or simply a good solid understanding of human nature, I think Paul is also writing to the generations of Christians to come whom he knew would also need this message. It doesn't take a very deep analysis of Paul's writing to see that he was no stranger to division in the Church. Jew vs. Gentile, rich vs. poor, fans of Paul vs. fans of Apollos, every church to which Paul writes was fractured in some way. Paul knew exactly what goes on in churches, how despite our new life in Christ, we keep finding reasons to argue with each other, to get mad at each other, to fall out of fellowship. We're a restless, rowdy bunch, we humans, regardless of how much we try to follow the loving example of Jesus.

It's hard work for us to set aside our differences and to live in love like one big happy family. Paul knows it's hard work and so he tells the Ephesians that he is doing his part to help. While they are working hard to get along, Paul is going to be praying hard for them. "I fall on my knees before the Father," is how the Phillips Modern English version puts it. When I was a small boy, I was taught that the proper posture for bedtime prayers was kneeling by the side of my bed and the sight of folks on their knees for prayer was not unusual in some of the more conservative churches I attended. Some of you who were raised in liturgical traditions will also have a strong memory of kneeling for prayer. But we progressive Christian types don't do much kneeling in our services anymore and in that we are actually more like the Christians and Jews of Paul's day. Their normal attitude for prayer was standing; kneeling or prostrating oneself in prayer was reserved for times of overwhelming emotion or need. So when Paul says that he is going to get down on his knees to pray, he is letting his readers know that this is a prayer that is important to

him, that he feels it deeply, that he is pouring his whole heart and soul into this petition on their behalf.

So just what is it that Paul is praying for so fervently? First, he prays “that according to the riches of God’s glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God’s Spirit.” The concept that God would grant us power through the Spirit for our strengthening “according to riches of his glory” is pretty staggering. If the power that Paul is praying for God to send us comes in proportion to the riches of God’s glory, then it will, in fact, be infinite, as God’s riches and glory are. The seraphim in Isaiah’s vision cried, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The writer of Psalm 104 affirmed, “The glory of the Lord shall endure forever.” Paul is bending his whole self to prayer that the Christians to whom he writes and all who follow them might experience an infinite supply of God’s power.

It’s an interesting contrast to what we humans have experienced in terms of the supply of what we commonly think of as power. We’ve been reminded again and again by recent world events that most of our power sources are limited, in some cases non-renewable, while the human thirst for power consumption grows and grows, seemingly unabated. The other night, Connie and I watched that old thriller, *Gaslight*, with Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergmann and a 17-year old Angela Lansbury. Part of the plot hinges on the fact that natural gas, the common household power of the Victorian era, was an extremely persnickety power source, with the gas lighting of one room being radically affected by gas jets in other parts of the house being turned on and off. This variable flow is not the sort of power that Paul has in mind for us to receive from God. Likewise, most of us have experienced the vagaries of waterpower or pressure. I’ve taken a lot of showers over the years with one ear cocked for the tell-tale sound of a toilet flush in another room or another apartment, ready to jump back from what was about to turn into an icy or scalding spray. The power that flows to us like the riches of God’s glory doesn’t come with those abrupt changes. When I was managing director for the University of Southern Indiana’s theatres, one of our ongoing frustrations was that the off-campus theater and costume shop for our undergraduate program were badly underpowered. There was a strict limitation on how many lighting instruments could be on and at what power setting. We also had to factor in our sound equipment and any irons, sewing machines, hand power tools, etc., that we wanted to use during a rehearsal or performance. Part of the problem was the wiring in the buildings but part of it was that our facilities were junctioned off a series of smaller and smaller trunk lines that served nearby residences. We needed industrial service, a mainline, but that was impossible in the neighborhood, at least without a major investment in infrastructure, which the university could never afford. Paul’s word to the Ephesians and to us: you’re tapped into the mainline.

It may make us nervous to think of having all this power available to us, of being this powerful ourselves. We live, after all, in a world where the abuses of political, financial or military power by men and women are evident both in our collective history and in our current events. But lest we shy away from being recipients of the limitless power of God, let us remember what we know of God’s power. God’s power is the power of creation, a sustaining power, a loving power, a redeeming power. God uses power to exalt those of low degree and fill the hungry with good things, to give sight to the blind and release to the captives and to bring all humans into loving

relationship with God self. This is the kind of power that is available to all of us through Christ Jesus, the kind of power Paul prayed for us.

In addition to praying for power for us, Paul prays that “Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” Wasn’t it fun to sing those old children’s songs this morning? I’ve always loved to sing “Down in my Heart,” particularly that tongue-twister verse that goes, “I’ve got the wonderful love of my blessed redeemer way down in the depths of my heart.” It’s unfortunate that this beautiful concept has been so overused and misused as to become a parody of itself. It seems that anyone wishing to lampoon Christians or our faith only has to put on a thick Southern accent and declaim “You’ve got to let Jay-zus into your hahrrt,” to get immediate laughs. But scrape away the cringe-inducing accretions from the phrase for a minute and think about the concept. That the essential character of Christ, his great love for all humankind and all creation, could become a permanent part of our deepest nature, that we could be rooted and grounded in his love, is a powerful, powerful idea. What Paul is praying for here is that our lives would be transformed, that our motivations would be so like the loving impetus of Jesus, that it would seem that our hearts, our most inner beings, had been merged with his. Paul’s not talking about a kind of brainwashing here — that our personalities would disappear and be replaced with that of Jesus. As Andrew Lincoln points out in his commentary on Ephesians, the key to Christ dwelling in our hearts is our faith and “Faith involves a relationship of trust between two parties.” We become more like Jesus as we learn to trust him to guide our lives, as he has trusted us to carry on his message and work. Our fate is not to be dissolved into some sort of nirvana, but to become fully ourselves, the very best that is within us. As Jesus said to his disciples, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” fully realized, living up to full potential.

“I pray,” writes Paul, “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.” This part of Paul’s prayer probably seems obscure and even paradoxical to us. What’s with all these dimensions and how can we know something that surpasses knowledge? Eugene Peterson’s popular paraphrase, *The Message*, does a good job with the first part of this question. “And I ask God that with both feet planted firmly on love, you’ll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ’s love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights!” In writing of the incredible scale of Christ’s love, Paul is borrowing language from the book of Job, which says in chapter 11, “Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than heaven, what can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know? Its measure is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.” There’s a similar passage in one of those books that Paul likely used that we Protestants have relegated to the Apocrypha: *Ecclesiasticus* or *The Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach*. On the wisdom of God, Ben Sira writes, “The sand of the sea, the drops of rain, and the days of eternity – who can count them? The height of heaven, the breadth of the earth, the abyss, and wisdom – who can search them out?” The language in Ephesians again suggests the fervency of Paul’s prayer, now raised to a positive ecstasy. He’s so excited by what God has in store for the believer through Christ that he can hardly express himself except to borrow the poetry of great Hebrew literature. And, as with any poetry, there’s a sense in which it doesn’t make sense, taken logically. Paul prays that we would come to know the unknowable, a paradox. Our faith seems to be full of them: a poor peasant child born to be

King, a man who was also God, a messiah exalted by being horribly executed as a criminal. The British scholar G.B. Caird once noted in his writing on Ephesians, “the attempt to know the unknowable is a paradox which is at the heart of all true religion.”

Of course, there is a sense in which the unknowable is knowable. Some things are known with the head and some with the heart. We may understand the deep, deep love of Jesus in ways that our logical minds could never explain. When I was managing director of Stage One: The Louisville Children’s Theatre, my colleagues in the education department and our assistant artistic director did a great deal of work with theories about “Different Ways of Knowing.” This educational theory centers on the different ways that different people learn from the world around them. All of us use multiple techniques, but each of us is strong with some and weak with others. Some are visual learners, some are auditory learners, some are tactile learners. For some, learning is based on their kinetic interaction with the world. To know the unknowable love of Jesus, I think, we must rely on a kind of emotional intuition that gives assent to a love so all-encompassing that our intellects cannot grasp it. Living in our information-centered world, we must always remember that at least a part of the best of us cannot be captured with empirical thinking.

Finally, Paul prays “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” It is an echo of Jesus’ statement, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” The image of being filled with all fullness reminds me of a phrase that I haven’t heard in a long time. OK, for those of you over probably 30, remember when you or mom or dad pulled the car into a gas station? And a man would actually come out of the station up to your car and say...? Right, “Fill ‘er up?” My friends over at Taproot Theatre are currently performing the third or fourth revival of their hit bluegrass musical, “Smoke on the Mountain.” If you haven’t seen it, I heartily recommend it, whether or not you think you like bluegrass music. Anyway, some of those old bluegrass gospel songs, like the ones in “Smoke on the Mountain,” used everyday images to talk about God’s love for humankind. One of the songs in “Smoke on the Mountain” is called “The Filling Station,” and some of the lines are:

“It’s time to get our hearts filled once again

Bring them in to the filling station

Let ‘em get a taste of good old-fashioned true salvation

Bring ‘em to the spout where the glory flows out...

Everything is free, it’ll never run out at the filling station”

It’s sort of silly, although it works like a champ in the context of the show, and it’s not a bad modern equivalent to “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Beyond the possible silliness of the metaphor, though, there’s a pretty profound theological point. In Colossians, Paul writes of Jesus, “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.” In praying for the fullness of God to fill us, Paul is praying in another way for us to take on the character of Christ. It is another reminder that now we are the Body of Christ on earth, charged to carry on together with the work of Jesus in proclaiming the Good News of the favor of the Lord to all those in need of spiritual and emotional healing from sin and brokenness.

It’s a big job and Paul knows it. It’s hard for all of us Christians with our different backgrounds and our different temperaments and our different ideas to combine as one Body, working

purposefully and in peace. It's hard for us to live as God would have us live, both separately and together. In the second half of this letter, Paul is going to give the Ephesians (and us) some very specific advice on how we can live lives that are worthy of our calling from God. As always, Paul is not giving new laws to replace the old, telling us how we must do in order to be saved. That's already taken care of by grace through faith as he wrote earlier in chapter two. But he is getting down to brass tacks on how life looks when we are following the path of loving each other and loving God.

That's a big job, too, and Paul knows it. But with all of the loving power of God available to us, we can live up to the higher standards that Jesus laid out in the Sermon on the Mount and that Paul will now begin to explore in this epistle. Not only that, but we can do amazing things in moving our world closer to being the Beloved Community that God desires. The final doxology of Paul's prayer reminds us that God, working in large part through God's people, can do what seems impossible. Again, "The Message" puts it well: "God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us." Sometimes, we Christians can be awfully timid about how much we can really accomplish. As managing director or executive director of several non-profit organizations and ministries, my job in the past has often been to say "No" to the dreams of artists or program personnel. "No, we can't afford that. No, we don't have the personnel. No, that's beyond us." As your pastor, I'll probably never be able to shake the pragmatic businessman side of myself and my training. But really, it's not my job to say "No" anymore. Now, it's my job to say, "Yes." "Yes" to our dreams of reaching and changing our community. "Yes" to new ways of talking amongst ourselves and to others about the love of God. "Yes" to anything that brings us all closer to the Beloved Community. To borrow yet another often used phrase, we can expect great things from God. We can do great things in the service of God. Because we are powered with the unflagging love of God and anything is possible in God's love.

Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.