

Pentecost 10 Proper 12, July 29, 2018

Sermon: Another Powerful Prayer

Text: Ephesians 3:14–21

Other Lessons: Genesis 9:8–17; Psalm 136:1–9; Mark 6:45-56

Genesis 9:8–17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” ¹⁷ God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Ephesians 3:14–21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

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

Mark 6:45–56

⁴⁵ Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ And after he had taken

leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. ⁴⁷ And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. ⁴⁸ And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, ⁵⁰ for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." ⁵¹ And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, ⁵² for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. ⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. ⁵⁴ And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him ⁵⁵ and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.

I have often told many of you that the Lord's Prayer is the prayer for all situations but sometimes we act as though it's the only prayer the New Testament teaches. This is because Jesus instructs us, "When you pray, say . . .". This morning we see that that is not so! In our epistle Paul interrupts his train of thought to offer a powerful prayer for those who face faith-shaking circumstances. For the Ephesians, it was uncertainty about what would happen to them now that Paul was in prison. Would they be arrested, too? Should they return to their old but safe religions? Paul prays as he does to calm their worries and fears.

How can you pray when members of your family, friends, or co-workers face faith-threatening situations? In our epistle Paul teaches us how to pray for those whose troubles may weaken their faith in Christ.

I think one of my pet peeves is when one hears that a person is going through difficult times today, they say, "You're in our thoughts." Maybe you've even said that yourself. But what can our thoughts accomplish? They have no power to change

anything. We Christians can do better. We can pray **“that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . . that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”** May you **“be filled with all the fullness of God.”** That’s the climax to Paul’s prayer, but it summarizes all that he asks beforehand.

What does it mean to be filled with the fullness of God? To pray that someone would be filled with the fullness of God is to ask that Jesus Christ dwell in that person. Faith is the only means by which Christ dwells in anyone’s heart. So, Paul is really praying their faith will remain strong despite his imprisonment. The only way that faith remains strong is by God empowering it through the Holy Spirit. And the only way that the Spirit empowers faint hearts is through the Gospel, whether it be read, heard, or received in the Supper. The Spirit never works apart from the Word, yet when some hearts are troubled and shaken, they turn away from hearing or reading the very Word that could strengthen them! If that absence continues, they’ll be running on empty!

If you see fellow members isolating themselves, you can offer more than, “I’ll be thinking of you.” You can say, **“I’m praying that God will fill you with all the fullness of Christ!”** Nothing is as powerful as asking the Father to strengthen the anxious with His Spirit so that Christ would dwell in them. For the indwelling Christ brings peace, forgiveness, life, and salvation to those who are troubled by any fear or anxiety.

Paul’s prayer goes further. He also asks that his hearers may have the power to grasp the magnitude of Christ’s love for them— **“that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth.”** Often when we face difficult times, the question comes, “Why did God let this happen to me?” We all start out very limited in our grasp of God’s love for us: “Jesus loves me! This I know, For the Bible tells me so.” The wise prayer asks God to give the anxious person the power to see beyond his or her condition to the magnitude of Christ’s love for them.

Why would Paul pray that God would give his hearers the power to grasp the enormity of God's love? So they won't lose heart! The devil loves nothing more than to isolate us, to make us believe we are insignificant, that God has better things to do, that he has better people to look after. He wants each of us to think, "Who am I among the billions of people, that God should help me?" That can make us feel insignificant, just as the Christians in Ephesus knew that they were an insignificant number of people, too. Ever since the launch of the Hubble Telescope, our understanding of the size of the universe continues to grow, but that can make us feel even more insignificant! Our planet seems like a mere speck of dust. Yet this is where God has focused His redeeming love. It was for fallen humanity that God sent His Son to set things right between Himself, us, and all creation. The fate of all human history reached its climax when one Jesus of Nazareth died in that insignificant little patch of land called Israel. But the enormity of God's love doesn't stop with Jesus' death and resurrection. He sent apostles and missionaries throughout the world to get the word of life out. He saw to it that faithful parents, grandparents, or friends spoke that love to generations of people. How about instead of "You're in our thoughts" we say "I'm also praying that God will help you see the enormous scope of His love for you, that He is not limited in the way that He can help you."

Paul asks God that the Ephesians understand the enormity of God's love in all of its fullness, yes. But even more, he asks that they will experience that love for themselves in Christ so that they have more than just knowledge of it. What such a prayer envisions for those for whom you pray is like the difference between hearing about a great teacher's techniques and watching that teacher use them in the classroom. Christianity is not just a matter of knowing that God is love, for even the devils know that, much to their dismay. But it is also the experience of it that Paul prays for his hearers— **"the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge."**

How and when does that experience take place? Today folks will

jump from one church to another trying to find the experience they're looking for. But the experience of God's love is not defined by a church's size, worship, or its architectural style. It is found where Jesus speaks to us in the Scriptures each week as we meet together. We experience that love as we hear Him speak forgiveness through the Absolution, for Jesus said to the apostles, **"The one who hears you hears me."** We experience that love as we receive him in the Sacrament as a pledge that he has given himself completely for us. Instead of, "You'll be in our thoughts," let's say, "I'm also praying that you will experience God's love as He gives it to you in worship and as the members of our church care for you."

With his bold requests, Paul asks much of God. He shows us that we, too, should ask much of God. It's OK to pray this way. Don't be cautious, for Paul instructs us when he ends with words that give us confidence to pray as he did: **"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations."**

Let your desire for the people of this congregation be that of St. Paul—that those for whom you pray would be filled with the fullness of God as Christ dwells in their hearts by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit, as He enables them to grasp just how great is His love for them in Christ Jesus, and as you and they experience that love in God's family. Amen.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

