

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Ephesians 3:14-21

NRSV: <sup>14</sup> For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, [a] <sup>15</sup> from whom every family[b] in heaven and on earth takes its name. <sup>16</sup> I 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 <sup>17</sup> and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. <sup>18</sup> I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth <sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

<sup>20</sup> Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and[c] in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

The Message: My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him 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! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.

<sup>20-21</sup> 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.

*Glory to God in the church!  
Glory to God in the Messiah, in Jesus!  
Glory down all the generations!  
Glory through all millennia! Oh, yes!*

Today, and the next three Sundays, we are going to focus our attention on the lectionary scriptures from Ephesians. Paul is credited with writing the letter to the church in Ephesus in approximately A.D. 60. The letter was not written to address any heresy or problems in the church at that time. It was written as a letter of encouragement; and it was expected to be shared with other neighboring churches.

Paul and his disciples established many churches among the Gentiles. This he recognized as his call and mission from God. Ephesus was established in A.D. 53 as Paul was returning home to Jerusalem. The Ephesian church was one of the most prominent church plants. He returned to visit the church two more times. Soon after his second, visit he sent Timothy to lead the church. Just a few years later, Paul was sent to prison in Rome. It was while he was in prison that he wrote the letter and sent it along with an Ephesian visitor, a messenger, Tychicus, who was returning to Ephesus.

The letter can be divided into two sections. The first two and a half chapters are a theological study on the nature of the church. In summary, the church is built on Jesus Christ. The heart of the church is not a building. The church of Jesus Christ is people, his people, of every race and nation, who love Jesus and are committed to serving him. The church is the people.

Things begin to shift in the letter when we get to the text we read today. These verses we heard are a prayer that Paul offers for the church. Following the prayer, we will find more practical applications for the first half of the letter.

The church was facing challenging times and needed this message from Paul. After painting a great picture of the Church, William Barclay describes in his commentary on Ephesians the culture of those days. He wrote: "This world is a disintegrated chaos; there is division everywhere, between nation and nation, between man and man, within a man's inner life, (I would include women, too). It is God's design that all the discordant elements should be brought into one in Jesus Christ. But that cannot be done unless the Church carries the message of Christ and of the love of God to every person." I read this and thought to myself, "Hmmm, this sounds familiar." Paul's letter to the Ephesians was written for just such a time as this in our history.

Paul wrote, "it is for this reason that I bow my knees in prayer." In those days, when people prayed, they stood to pray, with hands stretched out and palms facing upwards. Here, the word used to describe the physical position Paul took to pray means more than simply kneeling; it means that he prostrates himself, which means he was lying stretched out on the ground with his face downward, signifying this was a heartfelt, passionate prayer for the Church. He prayed with deep respect and reverence for God, knowing that God is amazing and capable of anything, to help the Church overcome the divisions threatening their unity and mission for Christ.

Paul acknowledged God in verse 15 as the "Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name." If you do a study of the Greek translation for Father and family, you find a complicated explanation that simply means to identify that, once again, the English language does not have an adequate word to describe the relationship between Father and family. Father is not meant to be interpreted as a physical being who potentially would walk out of a family's life and may never be known to a child. The relationship the Greek words describe is the most intimate relationship of love and of companionship and of care. The word 'family' indicates that the relationship we need is not just with God, but also with each other, even including a bond with Christians all over the world. We all are family.

This struck a nerve with me, perhaps it does with you too. Division seems to have become the accepted norm in our time as it was in the days when Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians. We see it in social status, race, politics, even the church. It concerns me when the church finds this acceptable. It's as if too many Christians throw their hands in the air and say, "We can't do anything to change this. It's a bigger problem than we can handle."

Paul's encouragement to the church tells us this is not so. He encourages the church to never succumb to a defeatist attitude. With God, all things are possible. If we give up without any effort on our part, we communicate to God that we don't have faith that he is greater than evil, that his power is limitless, especially if he is depending on us to do anything.

I'm sure this is not a challenge new to Christians today; It was a challenge Christians like the Ephesians faced too. With this in mind, Paul prays for three things for the Ephesian church, as well as all of those who would read this letter in the neighboring churches, and most assuredly for the Church wherever it existed. He essentially prays for three things for them: power, love and the fullness of God.

Paul prayed that they would be strengthened in their inner being with power through his Spirit. The inner being meaning strengthening of their reason, their ability of discernment between what was right or wrong. The inner being includes one's conscience, their ability to be sensitive and alert to Jesus's voice and will. And the inner being includes one's will, knowing what is right and what should be done, yet needing the incentive to carry-out one's intentions to do Christ's will.

Paul prayed that those in the church for Christ to dwell in their hearts as they become "rooted and grounded in love". He prays for love that is more than an emotion that comes and goes depending on how we feel and what is happening in one's lives. It's not a feeling that we conjure up and modify to our own mood.

Paul prays for a Love that has a "groundedness," a "rootedness," because Jesus lives in one's heart. Paul knows that it is Christ who is to order the heart toward love by living there; such a love should grow deeper, stronger and securer with time.

Finally, Paul prays for the Ephesian church to be slightly overwhelmed. He wants them to comprehend the incomprehensible. We read in verse 19 that Christians will be filled with all the fullness of God, the breadth, length, height, depth, and love that surpasses our knowledge of God" (v. 19). Our inner selves need to be open to and accepting of the reality that God is amazing, greater than anything we can imagine. With Him, all things are possible. Without this, we will be limited to what we are willing to do to do our part to take Jesus through our words and actions into our corner of the world, to heal division and the brokenness in our world.

(Have 4 boxes of different sizes for illustration) Here is a box. It's a small one. For some people, what they think of God could fit in this box. They have few expectations and limited knowledge of who God is.

Here is another box. It is a little larger. Many people would be comfortable with having a God who could fit in this box. Of course, there are many things that would have to be left out. But that is satisfactory with people whose God is no bigger than this.

In this box there may be room for love and grace and mercy, but not much room for any rules or commands that interfere with the way one wants to live their life.

Here is another box. It is bigger still. In this box there is room for some love and grace and mercy as well as some of the commands that are given in scripture. Of course, the only commands that fit are those the person accepts in his or her lifestyle choices.

And here is still another box. It is the biggest of all. It can hold God's love, mercy and grace as well as the commands of scripture. One can live a pretty good life with this box. But there is still something missing.

That's because our God is bigger than any box, we might put Him in. He is bigger than this room, this building, this town, this state, this country, this world. By His power He created the universe.

And with that power we can live our lives in ways that otherwise would be impossible. He tells us that whatever we face, He is able!

God wants out of the box, out of any box we try to put Him in. He doesn't fit there. He will not conveniently confine Himself to our limits, our boundaries. God is bigger than our box.

Ephesians 3:20-21 gives us an idea how big our God is. If you don't have an open Bible in front of you, please get your pew Bible and open it to Ephesians 3:20-21 (page) and let's read it together.

*"<sup>20</sup> Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, <sup>21</sup> to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."*

A God who can do "exceedingly abundantly above" anything we may ask, or think won't fit into any box, no matter how big the box may be.

There's a bigger picture for our world than the one we can imagine. For it to become a reality we need, power for faithful Christian living; hearts of love; a sense of the fullness of God in our lives. These are not things to pray only for others, but for us also. Let's ask God to make each of these things living realities in our own lives. The world, our nation, needs the Church to be alive with a vision and a mission that embraces the fullness of God. Amen.