

### Ephesians 3:14-20

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 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, 17 and 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, 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, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

20 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, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

### HOLY IMAGINATION

“Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?” All of us who have been ordained in the Presbyterian Church have answered that question (or one like it) in the affirmative.

I have often thought about this question and what it means to say “yes” to this call. In particular, I have wondered about what it means to answer this call to serve the church with imagination.

How can we use imagination in our service to the church? Certainly, this means that we should seek to be creative in our approach to ministry. Just because we’ve always done it that way doesn’t mean that we have to keep doing it that way in the future.

But, I think this call to imagination means more than just being creative in our approach to ministry, as much as that is needed. I would suggest it means being radically open to the surprising and renewing grace of God. It means letting our mind be renewed and transformed by the power of God’s Word as revealed in Jesus Christ. (Romans 12:2)

Several verses from the Old Testament come to mind.

The first is from the book of Lamentations. In the middle of a book filled with despair a surprising word of hope appears,

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.” (Lamentations 3:22-23)

God’s people lost everything when they were taken in exile to Babylon. But, even while the funeral for their nation was being held, there was still hope, hope born not of what they could do but hope born out of what God could do. The rising of the sun each day brought the promise of God’s future, even when that sun shone over the waters of Babylon.

And then I also think about the words of the prophet Isaiah to a people who had been in exile for a very long time. The prophet brought this Word of the Lord to a people for whom hope was but a distant memory, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” (Isaiah 43:19)

When we find ourselves in exile, we need eyes to see and ears to hear. We need the gift of divine perception. We need God to lift us up. We need God to give us a new spirit. We need God to restore the joy of His salvation. (Psalm 51:12)

This is something that we cannot do on our own. Our view of God and God’s message is always too limited. It is an understanding that surpasses knowledge. And for that understanding we need God’s help.

Paul got that kind of help. God in Christ turned him inside out and upside down. And Paul now prays that the Gentile Christians in Ephesus will receive that same kind of life changing experience.

The trials and tribulations of life often make us feel powerless and discouraged. We think that our situation is hopeless. And it is at times like these that we need to hear a blessing like the one Paul gave the Ephesians in our lesson for today.

Paul wrote, “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, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Despite appearances to the contrary, God is at work in our lives. And God is able to accomplish much more through us than we could ever ask for or even imagine.

When you think about the life of Jesus, people rejected him because his message was so unexpected. The people could not imagine God working in the life of one who was so familiar, so human.

And yet we believe that is exactly what happened. God was in Christ. God was at work in this very human and seemingly weak way. And nowhere did Jesus seem weaker than when he was on the cross.

But, this “weakness” proved to be the power of God’s salvation. This foolishness proved to be the very wisdom of God. And we believe that God continues to work in the same way today. The Word still becomes flesh through the ministry of Jesus’ disciples. We believe that God continues to work through us. (See 1 Corinthians 1:21 and ff.)

And that’s why we can keep the faith in the tough times. There is always more to the story than we can see or understand. God is still doing something through you and me.

There is power in that promise. And, according to our passage for today, our prayers should reflect that belief. We don't pray for what we want or for what we can imagine. We pray for what we can't know. We pray for what we can't imagine.

In other words we pray for a sense of the Holy. We ask that the glory of God might fill us, transform us, and lead us in the way that God would have us go.

#### DISRUPTIVE PRAYER

You may have noticed that our lesson from Ephesians is one long prayer. In the middle of his letter Paul bursts into spontaneous prayer.

Has anyone ever done that for you? It's happened to me. Right in the middle of a conversation some says, "Let's pray about this right here and now." And with that they begin an elaborate prayer.

There's something unnerving about that. I can understand praying in church or before meals or some such. But, spontaneous, unexpected prayer is disturbing. It interrupts the flow of life, the feeling of business as usual.

And yet isn't that the purpose of prayer? When we pray for someone we want something to change in his or her life. We want them to believe. We want them to be healed of some disease. We want them to attain peace of mind. We want them to see the very light of God.

Christian prayer is by its very nature a disruptive force. The revelation of God in Christ disrupts the world, as we know it. It changes things. It changes us.

And Paul's prayer was a very disruptive prayer. His prayer sets the world, as we know it alongside the world, as God would have it. His prayer allows no compromise with the world. Instead, his prayer envisions the transformation of the world according to God's plan.

In a world filled with violence and alienation, Paul speaks about a world where Jew and Gentile alike are given equal access to God. In a world filled with die-hard enemies Paul speaks about a world in which all are a part of the same family.

At the very beginning of his prayer Paul addresses God as the Father "from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name." In other words God created the world and all the families of the world. God was their Father, and that meant Jews and Gentiles alike were God's children.

This may not seem like a radical idea to us, but believe me when I say this was an extremely radical idea in the early Christian church.

We forget sometimes that all of the early followers of Jesus were Jews. Who were the Jews? The Jews were a people who had been persecuted and oppressed for centuries. Ancient armies conquered and scattered God's people to the four winds more than once. Assyria, Babylon and now Rome oppressed God's people.

So what kept the Jews together during these times of exile and oppression? It was one thing. The Jews believed that on a starry night God reached out to them and chose them to be God's special people. They were chosen by God to receive a gift of land when they had no land. They comforted themselves with the idea that God had promised to make something out of them.

Every week they rehearsed the story. They were nobodies, slaves in Egypt without a place to live and without hope. But, God did not forget his people. He delivered them from captivity and gave them a place that they could call their own. God was on their side. And it was this promise that sustained them through the most difficult and dismal times.

The Apostle Paul was steeped in this theology. Paul boasted that he was a Jew's Jew. He was trained by the best teachers and was a Pharisee, the group that sought to follow the law completely. Paul, the Pharisee led the movement to stamp out the heresy called the Way, those who sought to follow the way of Jesus.

#### MISSIONARY TO THE GENTILES

But, the risen Christ got hold of Paul. The Spirit of God turned him inside out and upside down. And that changed everything. When Paul was filled with the Spirit he was blinded so that he could see in a new way. And what Paul saw was a salvation that extended not only to the chosen people but also to all people, even the people who now persecuted his people.

Rome was tough on the people she captured. The Romans perfected a horrible means of punishment, crucifixion. This humiliating, agonizing death was used against any Jew who sought to question Rome's power. And yet Paul learned that the promises of God, the same promises that had sustained Israel down through the ages had also been extended to the Gentiles.

This was not something the Jews could imagine. Jewish Christians had a hard time with this. The first "General Assembly" of the whole church dealt with this problem. Does the grace of God really extend to the Gentiles? Can even our enemies be saved?

William Willimon says that the church has often referred to the Apostle Paul as the great "missionary to the Gentiles". But, in that day it was almost like saying Paul was the great "missionary to Al-Qaeda."

Think of it. After centuries of humiliation and persecution, Paul and his fellow Jewish Christians were now saying that God loved the Gentiles in the same way that God loved the Jews.

And as time passed the church became more and more Gentile and less and less Jewish. Jews had a hard time imagining that the grace of God could be so deep and wide.

#### A PRAYER FOR THE GENTILES

Today almost everyone in the church is a non-Jew, a Gentile. We are no longer shocked that the gospel is for Jews and Gentiles. This amazing turn of events happened so long ago that we have begun to take it for granted. Of course God has chosen us. Of course God wants to be with us.

Actually this tendency to take the grace of God for granted was present in the early church. The Ephesian church was, by and large, a Gentile church. And this prayer is a prayer for that church composed mainly of Gentiles.

The prayer really begins in Ephesians 3:1. In that verse Paul writes, “For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- ... Paul doesn’t complete the sentence. Instead, he goes into a long explanation of how he had received the mystery of Christ. And the mystery of Christ is this: the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Jesus Christ.

Who could have guessed that? No one could have guessed that. No one could have guessed that the grace of God would be so wide, so amazing.

And now that the Gentiles are the majority in the church they need to remember this. Once you’re in the majority, once the faith has become established, it’s very easy to start taking God’s grace for granted.

But, Paul doesn’t want that to happen. And so he breaks into prayer right in the middle of his letter. He prays that the Ephesians might be overwhelmed and transformed by the Spirit of God. Paul wants the Ephesians to comprehend the incomprehensible. He wants them to catch a vision God’s grace, a grace that is deeper and wider and higher than any of us can imagine.

You can’t catch that vision by studying real hard. Our Scripture for today tells us that the love of Christ surpasses knowledge. We can only understand such grand grace by experiencing it, by being filled with the Spirit of the living God.

#### GRATITUDE AND FORGIVENESS

Do you remember when Jesus was dining with a Pharisee and a notorious woman of the city barged in, threw herself before Jesus and began to rub sweet smelling ointment on his feet? (Luke 7:36 ff.)

The Pharisee thinks that this is terrible. He blurts out, “If this man were a real prophet, he would see what sort of woman this is who is behaving so scandalously.” After all, isn’t that the mark of a real prophet, to judge sin and sinners?

Jesus responded with a very simple parable. He said that two men owe a debt. One owes a million dollars and one owes a hundred dollars. Both men are forgiven their debts. Now think real hard Mr. Religious Expert which man would be more grateful?

The Pharisee responds, “Well, I suppose the one who is forgiven more.”

Jesus urges the Pharisee to look at the woman. Her sins “which are great” have been generously forgiven. And so she behaves in this great generous way.

And then Jesus goes on to tell the host a hard truth. The Pharisee thinks that he is righteous, that he has no great sins to be forgiven and so he behaves toward Jesus in a critical, miserly way.

The Pharisee was wrong. And we are wrong if we think that God has not forgiven us much. When it comes to true righteousness we all fall short, well short of what we should be. We need more than just a “little help” from God. We need a total overhaul.

And God has done it. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. We are new creations. The old has passed away, and the new has come. That’s what we need to comprehend. It’s more than just knowledge. It’s a personal experience of God’s amazing grace.

If we are to comprehend the depth and breath of God’s love and mercy, we have to understand how generous God has been with us. If we are to be “rooted and grounded in love” (as Paul put it in his prayer) we can’t just “know of” God’s love, we have to know God’s love personally.

## A PORTRAIT OF GRACE

At the conclusion of a worship service, the pastor, as was his custom invited “any who are so moved to come and join us in our fellowship.” Everyone was surprised when during the singing of the hymn an older man shuffled forward.

He was one of the homeless men who slept in the neighborhood. He had spent a few nights during the winter months in the church’s sanctuary. When the church office had been broken into one of those nights some pointed to this man as the culprit. So, when the man came back for shelter later on they pointed him to the shelter down the street.

But, there he was coming forward to join the church on Sunday morning. It was one of those moments that were awkward for everyone.

The man said, "I want you to know that I'm changing my ways. The love of God has touched my cold heart. I done some things for which I'm not proud. I'm ashamed of what I've become. But, now Jesus has touched me, and I want all of you to know."

They could barely understand him through his tearful testimony. The pastor said the usual things about how happy they were to have him and how he would be talking with him in the coming weeks.

The pastor gave the benediction and moved to greet the people at the door. The pastor was unnerved by this turn of events, and he could tell by the look on the faces of his parishioners that many of them were unnerved as well.

But, one woman looked at it differently. As she shook the preacher's hand she said with tears in her eyes, "Today I've seen the love of God. I had heard about that love, but today I got to see it."

#### DEEP AND WIDE

When I was a little boy we used to sing a song in Sunday school, "Deep and Wide". Some of you my remember it. We loved it because it came with hand motions. We would stretch our arms as wide and as high as we could.

That was a song about God's grace. God's grace flows deep and wide. And no matter how much we stretch we can't get our arms around that grace. It flows deeper and wider than we can imagine.

So, God needs to enlighten us. God needs to lift us up to that place where grace abounds.

That was Paul's prayer for the Ephesians. He wanted them to see the love of God. He wanted them to see God's amazing grace. He wanted to them to see the wideness in God's mercy.

And that's my prayer for us as well. I want us to marvel at God's love. I want us to see the God revealed in Jesus, the gracious God who accomplishes far more than we can ask or imagine.

AMEN.