

Knowing What Can't Be Known  
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Ephesians 3:14-21

14 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.

## KNOWING WHAT CAN'T BE KNOWN

In verse 19 of our lesson for today, Paul prays that the Ephesians might “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” (Ephesians 3:19)

How can we know something that surpasses knowledge?  
That seems like an oxymoron if ever there was one.  
And this conundrum is really at the heart of Paul's argument in his letter to the Ephesians.

We cannot know God.  
God is above us and beyond us.  
But, God through Christ has chosen to reveal what we could not know on our own.

Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians by telling them that before the foundation of the world God chose them “to be holy and blameless before Him in love.”

God destined them for adoption as His children.  
And as God’s children they have received an inheritance.

That inheritance was “the word of truth”, “the gospel of salvation”, and “the seal of the Holy Spirit”. These gifts of knowledge were given for a purpose, so that God’s people might be redeemed. (Ephesians 1:4-14)

## AMAZING GRACE

Grace was not a theory for the Ephesians.  
They had experienced it first hand.

They remembered a time when they were “dead in their sins” and far from the promises of God.

But, God in Christ saved them by grace through faith, not by works.  
And since their salvation was by grace alone they had no reason to boast.

Paul makes this point for a very important reason.

There was some sort of dissension in the church at Ephesus between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Earlier in the history of the church some believed that Gentiles had to become Jews before they could become Christians. Maybe this was behind the disagreement.

Or perhaps now the shoe is on the other foot.

Maybe the Gentile Christians now outnumber the Jewish Christians and are starting to disparage those who stay true to their Jewish ways.

Whatever the disagreement Paul tells the church at Ephesus that the grace of God should unite them instead of tearing them apart. God’s grace should tear down the dividing wall of hostility and bring them together as one family of faith. (Ephesians 2:1-22)

Mike Slayter gets a copy of the bulletin each week, and when he saw that I had chosen Amazing Grace as one of the hymns he emailed me to let me know that this hymn had been used while I was on vacation. The implication being that it might be good to choose a different hymn.

I would have done that but the bulletin had already been printed when his email arrived. So, I emailed back, "That's okay. It's still amazing."

Mike knows me very well.  
He shot back, "I thought you'd say that."

As I thought about our good natured banter, it occurred to me that there was some truth to what we said. Amazing grace is the subject every week. God's grace is not only amazing; it is the glue that holds us together and the good news that we bring to the world.

It is still amazing.

To paraphrase a commercial now running on TV.  
Grace, its what we do.

## PAUL'S STORY

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul talked about how grace had worked in his own life. The Apostle's interest in the mystery of God's grace is in no way theoretical. He had experienced it first hand.

We know the story. Paul was on the way to persecute members of the early church when he was confronted by the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He was blinded so that he could see. He was converted.

And that changed everything.  
The great persecutor of the church became the church's greatest missionary.

That amazing moment stayed with Paul for the rest of his life.

It was a holy moment, a great mystery revealed by the power of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

And this revelation, this knowledge of grace that came from God, now guides Paul's understanding of the world.  
Now Paul knows in the depths of his being that God loves the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike. God's grace is not limited in any way but extends to the whole creation.

Paul's life work then became revealing this mystery to others.

He wanted more than anything else to give others this gracious knowledge that he himself had received.

He wanted to give others the knowledge of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

He wrote that we have “access to God” through this grace.

## THE PROBLEM

But, despite all this amazing grace there was a problem.

Paul was suffering and was quite possibly in danger of losing his life.

We don't know exactly what was going on, but we can guess. There are many accounts in the Bible of how Paul struggled and suffered for the gospel.

The church at Ephesus depended upon Paul's leadership and spiritual guidance. They were worried about what they would do when Paul was gone. (Ephesians 3:1-13)

Paul was worried too.

So Paul prayed for them.

He prayed that they might not lose heart.

He wanted them to focus on the riches of God's grace and God's glory.

He wanted them (to use one of my favorite phrases) “to look up instead of about”.

Paul reminded them once again.

It's not about me or you.

It's about God and God's grace.

It's not about the messenger.

It's about the message.

Now we come to our lesson for today.

Paul continues this spontaneous prayer that focuses on the power of God's grace and love as revealed in Jesus. At this point, he gets down on his knees as prays for the Ephesians.

And what does he pray?

## ALL IN THE FAMILY

First, he reminds the Ephesians through his prayer that God is the One from whom “every family on heaven and earth take their name.” God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and God loves his creation.

Every family takes their name from God.  
In God all of us live and move and have our being.

Paul wants to remind the Ephesians that the whole world is in God’s hands. The love of the Creator God is the one thing that unites us all. The love of the God, the Father of us all is the one thing that we can count on.

Many years ago at Presbytery a minister told us about a young man who wandered into her office one day. He had left home and had fallen on hard times.

He was sort of a modern day prodigal son ... homeless, hungry and desperate. So he came to that minister for help.

The minister listened patiently to his story and then she finally convinced the young man to call home and ask his parents for help. The young man was hesitant to do this because of the way he had treated his folks but with her encouragement he agreed to give it a try.

As he talked on the phone tears filled his eyes, and the minister was eager to hear what the young man had to say.

The boy had talked to his father who told him to stay “right there.” He was catching a plane that night to come and get him. And sensing the great shame and discouragement of his son he said, “Don’t worry. Everything will be all right. Remember, you’re our son.”

Every family is a part of God’s good creation. And since you are a part of that wider family, you have access to that Divine love. There’s a wideness in God’s mercy.

## GOD HELP US

Second, Paul prays that God’s Spirit may give the Ephesians the strength and power that they need to make it through this difficult time. Sometimes when things go sideways, we say, “Only God can help us now.”

That's true.

But, this is true not just during the tough times. It's true all the time.

It is the power of God's Spirit that gives us life and enables us to make it.

Thinking about the power and strength of God should not be relegated to the tough times.

This should be a source of hope on a daily basis.

God's Spirit reminds us of this.

## THE POWER OF LOVE

Third, Paul describes in his prayer what the power and strength of God looks like.

It is not the power and strength that divides people.  
It is the power and strength that brings people together.

He prayed that Christ might dwell in their hearts so that they might be "rooted and grounded in love."

I like that phrase, "rooted and grounded in love."

The foundation for the Christian life is love.

God's grace as revealed in Jesus Christ transforms us into gracious people.

## DEEP AND WIDE

Fourth, Paul prays that the Ephesians might be able to comprehend the dimensions of God's love. God's love is expansive.

We learn in Paul's letter to the Ephesians that God is not in the business of building walls that separate people. God is in the business of tearing walls down.

The love of God causes us to stretch.

The love of God causes us to include those whom we thought were outside the walls of faith.

When I was in Bible school we used to sing a little song called "Deep and Wide." Perhaps some of you remember it.

We would stretch our arms as high as we could and as wide as we could as we sang the song. It was a lot of fun.

But, that simple little song taught a grown up lesson.  
We cannot wrap our arms around the height and depth of God's love.

His love is too deep and too wide.

But, it is good to try and stretch as far as possible toward that love. Straining toward the grace of God does indeed make us into more gracious people.

And it is through our pursuit of that love that God stretches us to "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge."

## KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION

Did you ever think about how we "know" what we think we "know?" There's actually a branch of philosophy that asks that question.

It's called epistemology.

We can know things by reading about them.

We can know things because they are revealed to us.

We can know things by doing scientific experiments.

So, how do we know about God?

The best way to "know" the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is not just to read about it.

The best way to know the love of God is to also put it into practice.

When we love, when we practice the grace of God by being gracious toward others, this gives us a knowledge that cannot be obtained any other way.

We preachers often encourage people to read the Bible.

And indeed reading the Bible and memorizing Scripture is very important.

But, just encouraging people to know about the Bible is not enough.

The Bible is not just a good story.

It is also a call to action.

We believe that God was in Christ.

We believe that grace and truth are revealed in Jesus.

And if we believe that, then it follows that we are called to do something about it. We are called like the apostle Peter to feed the sheep, to make the love of God in Christ a reality in the world.

How do we know the love of God in Christ?  
 We don't always believe ourselves into acting.  
 We sometimes act ourselves into believing.

It's a cycle.  
 Belief and action reinforce each other.

Knowledge of the faith comes through belief and action.  
 When we act graciously in the name of Christ we feel the presence of God in our bones.  
 We are, as Paul put it, "filled with all the fullness of God."

We know by faith what we could not learn any other way.  
 We become what God has intended us to become.

## LOVE WE CANNOT IMAGINE

Paul closes his prayer with a doxology.  
 And in that doxology, the apostle describes God as the One who can "accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine ..."

God's love and grace have been at work in us from the very beginning.

That love is powerful.  
 That love is transformative.  
 That love continues to change us in way that we cannot imagine.

There is literally no limit to what God's love can do through us.  
 It is beyond our comprehension and yet we can feel it.

There is nothing to compare with God's love, but let me give you an example that might give you an inkling of how this process works.

When I think of a love that surpasses knowledge, I think of a baby cradled in her mother's arms.

She is loved, but that baby couldn't begin to describe that love.

She can't talk.  
She doesn't have thoughts about love.

All she has is the experience of love.

But, the fact that she can't comprehend or explain love does not make that love less real. In fact this early experience of love becomes the basis of all later understandings and expressions of love.

We learn to trust our world when we experience love as an infant.

God's love for us works in the same way.  
It is above and beyond us.  
It is something that we cannot possibly understand.  
God's love is too high and too deep for words.

And yet that love has been with us, that love has filled us from the very beginning.  
And that love continues to guide us and challenge us for the days ahead.

## A WONDERFUL LIFE

So what about you?  
Do you feel like your life is insignificant?  
Do you feel like you're on a treadmill going nowhere?

Hear the good news.  
God can do more with you than you think God can.

God is at work in your life.  
God has always been at work in your life.

You may not see it.  
But, it's there.

You are important to God.  
You have a role to play in the kingdom.  
There's more to your story and to God's story than you can imagine.

You are loved.

Do you remember that old movie, "It's a Wonderful Life?"

Jimmy Stewart portrayed a person who was on the verge of suicide because he thought that he had failed in life. He thought that his life didn't make any difference.

But, then the angel gave him the opportunity to see what life would have been like had he not lived. And eventually Jimmy understood that indeed his life was important.

I believe that's true for all of us.

The love that we experience and share are like ripples in a pond. God can do far more with us than we could ever imagine.

Our lives are part of a greater plan. We are loved.  
And we love.

And that love helps us know what can't be known.

Amen.