SERMONWRITER
Ordinary Time 17
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 3:14-21 NRSV

[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.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY: **THE CONTEXT:** The recipients of this letter were mostly Gentile Christians. In chapter 2 and the first half of chapter 3, Paul talked about the great transformation that God has wrought in their lives, from death to life (2:1-10)—and how Christians are no longer divided into Jew and Gentile, but are now one in Christ Jesus (2:11-22). He then related how God called him to minister to Gentiles (3:1-13). Now he concludes chapter 3 with a prayer for the recipients of this letter. This is the third week we have a reading from Ephesians in a series of seven readings.

EPHESIANS 3:14-16. STRENGTHENED THROUGH HIS SPIRIT *[14]For this cause, I bow my knees to the Father* (Greek: *patera*) *of our Lord Jesus Christ, [15]from whom every family* (Greek: *patria*) *in heaven and on earth is named, [16]that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, that you may be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inward man;*

"For this cause" (v. 14a). This phrase links the verses that follow to what Paul said earlier—that Christians are now one in Christ Jesus with no separation between Jewish and Gentile Christians (2:11-22) and that God called Paul to minister to Gentiles (3:1-13).

"I bow my knees" (v. 14b). In that time and place, people prayed standing or kneeling. The bowing of knees is a gesture of reverence.

"to the Father (*patera*) **of our Lord Jesus Christ"** (v. 14c). Note the wordplay between Father (*patera*) in this verse and family (*patria*) in the next verse—a graceful note that is nearly impossible to replicate in a translation.

Paul uses the word Father for God. In patriarchal families of that day, the father was the authority figure, a man to be obeyed. He was responsible for providing for his family—protecting them—and bringing up his children to obey God.

Jesus used the word Father (*pater*) for God nearly 150 times, including once where he addressed God as *Abba ho pater*—*Abba* being the Aramaic word that children would use to address their father.
The words "of our Lord Jesus Christ" are not found in the oldest (and therefore presumably the best) manuscripts. Most modern translations omit them.

"from whom every family (*patria*) **in heaven and on earth is named"** (v. 15). The assignment of names is the privilege of the creator. In human families, the father and mother name their children. Naming is essential to the child's identity. Not only does our name tell us who we are, but it ties us to our parents, who gave us our name. But the Heavenly Father is the ultimate creator—the one who created all families, both those on earth (who are still alive) and those in heaven (those who have died). The Heavenly Father is thus privileged to assign names to all families—and to all of creation (Genesis 1:5, 8, 10). Being named by the Heavenly Father gives us our spiritual identity, and ties us to our Father. But not everyone is a child of the Heavenly Father:
• In his first epistle, John said, "Whoever is born of God doesn't commit sin, because his seed remains in him; and he can't sin, because he is born of God. In this the children of God are revealed, and the children of the devil. Whoever doesn't do righteousness is not of God, neither is he who doesn't love his brother" (John 3:9-10).
• In an exchange with opponents who claimed God as their father, Jesus replied, "If God were your father, you would love me, for I came out and have come from God.... You are of your father, the devil" (John 8:42, 44).

"that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, that you may be strengthened with power (*dunamis*) **through his Spirit in the inward man"** (v. 16). Paul prays that God would strengthen these Ephesian Christians "with power (*dunamis*) through his Spirit in the inward man."

The Greek word *dunamis* (from which we get our word dynamite) speaks of a special kind of power—the ability to do or to accomplish. It is an enabling sort of power, because it equips us to do good things while leaving us freedom to exercise that power.

It is natural that this power would come through the Holy Spirit—the presence of God with us—God dwelling in our hearts—God guiding and empowering us.

Paul prays that the measure of power accorded these Ephesian Christians might be in accord with "the riches of (God's) glory." What a prayer! The riches of God's glory are infinite, so Paul is praying for God to shower these Ephesian Christians with infinite blessings. As Buzz Lightyear of "Toy Story" would put it: "To infinity and beyond!"

EPHESIANS 3:17-19. FILLED WITH ALL THE FULLNESS OF GOD *[17]that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; to the end that you, being rooted and grounded in love, [18]may be strengthened to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, [19]and to know Christ's love which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

"that Christ may dwell (*katoikeo*) **in your hearts** (*kardia*) **through faith"** (*pistis*) (v. 17a). The Greek word *katoikeo* (dwell) combines *kata* (in this context meaning "a place where") and *oikeo* (to dwell—related to *oikos*, which means "house" or "home"). The sense we get here, then, is of Christ setting up housekeeping in the hearts of these Christians—of Christ making their hearts his dwelling place.

The Greek word *kardia* (heart) refers to the center of one's being, both physical and spiritual—that which makes the individual person what he or she is—character, intellect, personality, etc. Paul's vision is that, having experienced God's infinite blessings, these Christians might harbor Christ's presence in the innermost parts of their being.

The Greek word *pistis* (faith) has to do with the person's response to the *kerygma* (the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ). If Christ is to dwell in the hearts of these Ephesian Christians, they must receive him in faith. Christ wants to bless every person, but will not force his way into their hearts. Faith is the key that unlocks the door.

"to the end that you, being rooted and grounded in love" (*agape*) (v. 17b). As every gardener knows, plants depend on their roots for nurture and sustenance. The roots might be underground—invisible to the casual observer—but they are absolutely essential to the well-being of the plant.
But much also depends on the soil in which the roots are rooted. If the soil has moisture and nutrients, the roots will extract those and feed the plant—so that the plant can prosper. However, if the soil contains no moisture or nutrients, the roots will be helpless—unable to support the life of the plant—and the plant will die.

But these Christians have no reason to worry about the spiritual soil in which they are rooted. It is *agape*—God's love—the kind of love that a mother showers on her child—the kind of love that focuses on giving rather than getting.

"may be strengthened to comprehend" (*katalambano*) (v. 18a). Being rooted in and surrounded by God's love makes it possible for these Christians to understand spiritual mysteries—"what is the breadth and length and height and depth." But *katalambano* means more than comprehending or understanding. The Greeks used this word to speak of reaching out to cross the finish line—to win the prize. Paul is praying that God will strengthen these Christians to enable them to reach out and grasp the prize—to emerge victorious.

"with all the saints" (v. 18b). With Christ rooted in the depths of their being, these Christians join with all the saints—not just those who live nearby, or even those who are still alive. We, today, are joined with all the saints of history when we come to Christ in faith. We are joined with all the saints of far-away lands—people whose color and culture are different than ours, but who share our faith in Christ. We are also joined with Peter and Paul and Augustine and Luther and Calvin—and the millions of unknown saints who have served Christ faithfully through the centuries.

"what is the breadth and length and height and depth" (v. 18c). Having Christ at the center of our lives makes it possible for us to understand "the breadth and length and height and depth"—the infinite measure of the one in whom we believe.

"and to know Christ's love which surpasses knowledge" (v. 19a). The love that Paul mentions here is Christ's love for us—not our love for Christ. He says that Christ's love surpasses knowledge. While the Greeks prized knowledge, their knowledge could take them only so far. For one thing, their knowledge was imperfect. We have learned so much in the past two thousand years, but our knowledge is also imperfect. Also, our knowledge, however perfect, cannot bring us into the kingdom of God. Only Christ's love has that power.

"that you may be filled (*pleroo*) **with all the fullness** (*pleroma*) **of God"** (v. 19b). Elsewhere, Paul said that "in (Christ) all the fullness (*pleroma*) of the Godhead dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9). This, of course, is the Incarnation—Christ born in Bethlehem—"the word become flesh" (John 1:14). This belief stood in opposition to the dualistic belief, popular in the first century, that the spiritual is good and the material is bad.

Now Paul prays "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; to the end that...you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (vv. 17, 19). In other words, the Christ who embodied the Godhead (Colossians 2:9) makes it possible for Christians to be "filled with all the fullness of God" (v. 19b)—so that we also embody the Godhead. Those who had embraced Greek dualism would find this nearly impossible to believe. Many people today would find it nearly impossible to believe that Christians are "filled with all the fullness of God." Are the members of your congregation "filled with all the fullness of God"? Certainly, there are a few who would fit that description, but are most church members "filled with all the fullness of God"? If God has answered Paul's prayer (3:14, 19), then you and the other unlikely candidates have, indeed, been "filled with all the fullness of God." We are the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16). God's Holy Spirit dwells in us. Let us approach our personal identity with the same reverence that we feel when we enter a church sanctuary.

EPHESIANS 3:20-21. TO GOD BE THE GLORY [20]*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,* [21]*to him be the glory in the assembly and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.*

"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" (v. 20). Has Paul, in praying for these ordinary Christians to "be filled with all the fullness of God," asked too much? Not at all! God "is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think"—beyond anything our minds can imagine.

Earlier, Jesus promised: "Most certainly I tell you, he who believes in me, the works that I do, he will do also; and he will do greater works than these, because I am going to my Father. Whatever you will ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you will ask anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:12-14). That too seems too grand to be true—until we consider the meaning of asking in Jesus' name. To pray in Jesus' name requires that we first try to understand Jesus' mind so that our prayers represent his will as closely as possible. To pray in Jesus' name is to bring our prayers into accord with the essential character of Jesus. When we do that, everything becomes possible.

At his ascension, Jesus promised: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. You will be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1:8). We, Jesus' disciples, are his chosen instruments for proclaiming the Gospel. It makes sense, then, that he would enable us for that task. The enabling power is the Holy Spirit.

"to him be the glory in the assembly (*ekklesia*) **and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen."** (v. 21). Paul concludes this chapter with a doxology (an expression of glory to God). Doxologies of this sort are found frequently in both Old and New Testaments (Psalm 28:6; 31:21; 119:12; Romans 11:36; Galatians 1:5, Philippians 4:20, etc.). The Greek word *ekklesia* (usually translated "church") means "those who are called out." That is how Israel thought of itself—called out to be the people of God. The church continues that tradition under the banner of Christ.

Jesus called the church to proclaim the glory of God in perpetuity—"forever and ever." That is how it has worked out. It has been two thousand years since Jesus walked the dusty pathways of Israel, but the church is still giving God glory. We are not only singing songs of glory in our worship, but we are also proclaiming the Gospel far and wide—and feeding the hungry and healing the sick all over the world in the name of the Christ who has called us. Who could have imagined such a thing? God could. Jesus could. Paul could. And it took place just as they envisioned.

Theology: This is a prayer of reassurance for believers. Center your life in Christ and you will know a stable base and launching pad for living.