

"A PRAYER FOR ALL SEASONS"

A Sermon On Ephesians 3:14-21

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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, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

When this scripture last rotated to the front of the lectionary Terry and I had just arrived to take up our appointment among you. On that Sunday in July of 2003 I organized my message to you around the experience of unpacking and discovering a long neglected gift. Today I return to that image and story; not because there is nothing else to say, but because in preparing for this service the story has spoken to me in a new way.

Here is what I said to you in July of 2003:

The process of moving – packing up everything you own and moving it to another place, then unpacking and unwrapping everything – offers a unique opportunity to examine and reflect upon what has become the stuff of one's life. Our move to Port Huron has been that experience for Terry and me. We have touched and lifted things that we have not seen in years. We have pondered objects that date back to the beginnings of our life together. We have discovered things that we had forgotten were ours. One of those objects was a gift from a friend we now seldom see. Years ago this friend gave us a set of beautiful wind chimes. Since receiving them, these chimes hung in a corner of our family room in Warren. We put them there because we were afraid that exposed to the elements the chimes would

deteriorate – the brass might turn dark and the wood weather-beaten. Last week I came across these chimes while unpacking the last of our boxes. I looked at them as though seeing them for the first time. A tag on the chimes announced that they were finely tuned chimes and specially prepared for the out of doors. I noticed that outside the kitchen window at our new home a bracket waited for something to support. I marched outside and hung the wind chimes at the corner of the house just above the back deck. The chimes began to sing. The gentlest of breeze created the most pleasant of sounds. These chimes are like soft bells tuned to a pentatonic scale which means that no matter how they play the sound is always sweet and harmonious. For the first time since coming into our lives these chimes are free to play and soothe the soul. Now I think about all the years they hung quietly in a corner of our family room because we were afraid and I am embarrassed at how timid and fearful we can sometimes be.

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, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

My brothers and sisters we have been given a gift. We have a song to sing to this troubled world, but to sing it we must engage with the winds around us. If we allow fear to drive us into protecting and preserving ourselves then we may avoid the tarnish that might possibly come to us, but we will certainly never share our gift, and the songs of joy sung by the children of God will never be heard. This is how I have come to understand Paul's eloquent prayer for the young Christian community of Ephesus. He is praying that they will be moved beyond the surface attributes of being a Christ follower. He is praying that God

will move them to understand the full depth and power of love that God has initiated in Jesus the Christ. It is a prayer still relevant today. It is in fact a Christian prayer for all seasons.

Move this prayer out of its historical context and it becomes a prayer for this present moment. It moves from a prayer for the people of Ephesus and becomes a prayer for you and me in Christian ministry in Port Huron. It is a prayer that can set an agenda capable of sustaining this congregation for another 175 years and beyond. I pray that we may be strengthened for the work ahead and that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith as we are being rooted and grounded in love. And I pray that we may come to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of that love and that we will know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with the fullness of God.

Nothing is more central to my ministry than this prayer which I lift up daily. As God answers this prayer, as I am confident God already is doing, we will find ourselves in ministry in ways we have not yet imagined, sharing with people we do not yet know the joy of Christ. It does not matter what challenges we may face. Those things are of no consequence to those filled with the fullness of God. The signs of God's presence among us are already evident. We have been celebrating those signs all year in our 175th anniversary celebrations. The return of our youth from another successful mission trip is one of those signs. As I pondered this morning's scripture I thought of those wind chimes held silent by the anxiety in Terry and me – chimes that now are liberated and doing what wind chimes are supposed to do. I thought of how many of our churches are in full retreat away from ministry driven by the fear that somehow they might be damaged if they engage

with the world in which they find themselves. I want you to know that nothing is more important to me than the strengthening of this church – that we take the hard work and sacrifice of those who have brought us to this point in our ministry and we build upon it.

How shall we do this? Paul provides a clue. Being the first to take the gospel of Jesus the Christ out of the Jewish community and into the gentile world, Paul knew something about reaching people who had no natural proclivity for the gospel story. Yet somehow the gospel took hold and people's lives were changed. How did he do it?

First he did it by making himself a servant of that gospel. That is Paul turned the central focus of his life over to the gospel. It became the foundation of his life. It was a solid foundation. It endured all manner of hardships and imprisonment. What would we be like if we became as completely as possible servants of the gospel? How would our church be different? What would change in the way we do things? Well for one thing we would stop worrying about whether we lived or died and we would live as God's people for as long as is given to us. That is the way Paul lived.

Secondly we would stop worrying about whether or not we were good enough to serve God. No one ever is. Paul, most of all, was aware of his shortcomings. But Paul trusted that God was great enough to use him even as imperfect as he was. There is no such thing as an unimportant person or an unimportant church in the service of God. Whatever gifts we have to present, God can and will use. That is part of the Grace of God.

Thirdly we would trust the central mystery of God. That is, we would allow ourselves to be caught up in the joy of being brought together with all of God's children into one spacious household of God. For God's purpose in this world is to enfold everyone in arms of love and bring them back to God. That includes you and me. It also includes the

drug dealers and the addicts. For in God's purpose of love NO ONE IS LEFT OUT.

This is my hope for all of us. I pray that others might find their way to God's love in the way that we live. I pray that we will quit trying so hard to be the masters of our own universe and we will allow ourselves to become servants of the gospel. I pray that God will grant you the strength to live with peace in your heart and that Christ may dwell within you through faith as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to understand in your bones the depth and the power of Christ's love and that no matter where you have come from you may now be filled with the fullness of God.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

Ephesians 3:1 - 21 (NRSV)

¹This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for [£]Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— ²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, ³and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. ⁵In former generations this mystery [£]was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ⁷Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. ⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make everyone see [£]what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in [£]God who created all things; ¹⁰so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. [£] ¹³I pray therefore that you [£]may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory. ¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, [£] ¹⁵from whom every family [£]in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I 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, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and

height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.