

“A Prayer for the Family of God”
Ephesians 3:14-21 (NRSV)

Perhaps you have the same problem I have – **my mind sometimes wanders as I pray**. For example, as I began to make petition this morning, I prayed for my ninety-three year-old mother, and as I thought about her, I envisaged the challenges our family encountered after we’d immigrated to Canada in the early 1950s, and then the difficulties which our Mom, my five siblings and me faced together as our father left our home in the early 1960s. Then I somehow began to think of the landscaping jobs I managed to find on tony Island Park Drive where many of the embassies are located, in Ottawa, Ontario, as I worked my way through a couple of degrees at university with the help of a 1953 green Chevy truck with a yellow road-runner painted on the back tailgate! What began so properly and spiritually ended up being a stroll down Memory Lane – **I need a prayer list!**

If you’ve ever done that, don’t be too hard on yourself – **it sometime happens to the very best, even to the Apostle Paul**. Admittedly, his lapses are much more spiritual than mine, but nevertheless **there are lapses**. For example, as he’s dictating his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul interrupted his discussion of the blessings God provides to believers and the creation of the church by thinking out loud for a few moments about his own sufferings for the church in chapter three, verse one, only to return to his busy mind’s thoughts about the mystery of God’s new society, the Church, in verse two to thirteen, and then he turns to a magnificent prayer for the Church in verse fourteen, which I’ve just read for this morning’s text. Perhaps **there were times when Paul could have used a list of what he was going to say and maybe a prayer list too!**

Be that as it may, Paul is now fully engaged in **a magnificent prayer for God’s masterwork, the Christian Church Family**. It’s one of the most beautiful and oft-quoted prayers in Scripture, especially in its reference to **“the “breadth and length and height and depth ... of the love of Christ”** (3:18) that is ours. It’s a wonderful prayer; it’s a heartfelt prayer for Christians, for God’s Family, for the Christian Church. **Paul loves the Church. Paul prays for the Church’s well-being. So may we.**

Even though it was raining, **Colleen and I drove down the I-5 to the Skagit Valley in Washington State** on the Monday after Easter **to see the tulips**. The abundance and colours of my favourite flowers were, as usual,

spectacular, even set, as they were, in rain-soaked, muddy fields. On our way home, while driving along the Guide Meridian, west of Bellingham, **something else** caught our attention. There were **a couple of red signs, with white lettering, on several people's lawns**. Jaded by the ubiquity of the election signs on people's lawns here in Canada I almost missed them. This is what was written on them, **"I love [represented by a heart symbol] my church."** I thought, "How neat!" So **Paul plants his love for the church right in front of us in this prayer**. Paul loves the church. "I love my church." I hope you do too.

Did you notice that Paul **gets on his knees to pray this prayer** (4:14a)? This was **a rather unusual posture** for him to adopt. Jews normally stood to pray and, if you were super sincere, you might also rock back and forth on the balls of your feet, as you intone your prayers, much as you may still see pious Jews doing today as they stand in front of the "Wailing Wall" in Jerusalem, but **you do not normally find Jewish believers kneeling**. Presbyterians who usually sit to pray and, at most, adopt "the Protestant shampoo position," can identify with this. You and I might kneel beside our beds to pray before we go to sleep at night but, in contrast to Roman Catholics and Anglicans, we do not usually kneel in public.

Kneeling indicates an extraordinary event or an unusual passion.

Perhaps Paul pens this prayer with unusual emotion because his discussion of the mystery of the Christian Church catches in his own throat. Paul is moved by the very words he preaches. There's a message here, I'm sure, for every one of us that preaches the gospel. If God's Word doesn't touch us in our own hearts and minds and souls, I'm sure it probably won't grab any one else's attention. It's also a message for anyone who listens to Paul's words with a ho-hum attitude. Friends, it's all right to let the gospel get to you.

Notice also how Paul addresses God. He's on his knees **"before the Father..."** (3:14b). Now, **I don't want to get into a major discussion about the language we use in speaking about God.** It's well known the Bible normally uses a masculine metaphor for God, so to call him **"Father,"** as Paul does here, is quite common, although in other places in Scripture, **God can also be spoken of as being "like a mother"** (Isa. 49:15; 66:13; Matt. 23:37; Lk.13:34). Jesus, who is portrayed in the New Testament as addressing God as his "Abba," or heavenly Father, taught that God is beyond gender: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:27).

So, let's not get into a debate about language today; rather, let's just notice that Paul speaks about God as being: **One “from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name”** (3:15).

When my wife, Colleen, and I have time to talk about **important things**, the first topic we will talk about is **our children and grandchildren**. We discuss what's happening in each of their lives. We relate to each other the conversations we've had with them, or the emails we've received from them. We do some paternal and maternal bragging: we congratulate each other on how beautiful and how brilliant our grandchildren are. And we share our prayer concerns for them. We especially love our own. They are our pride and joy. So, too, it is with Paul's realization of **his relationship with his heavenly Father**, and **his relationship with God's children**, God's own family, many of whom would rightly call Paul their spiritual father, especially as they found salvation, shelter and sustenance in the Church through Paul's preaching about Christ.

Paul has fallen to his knees because of two realities: first, **the sublime truth and power of God's Holy Word**, creating the Church, and second, **the soul-healing Fatherhood under which he and every one else in the Christian family rest**. This realization now springs forth in **three major petitions for the Church**: for strength, for love, and for fullness.

1. A prayer for a great inner strength (Ephesians 3:16-17a).

Paul prays first for the Christian family members' strength. “I pray that, according to the riches of [God's] 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...” (3:16-17a). The main idea is this: **just as all of us need to be strengthened mentally, physically and emotionally** to take all that life throws at us, so **God's children need to be strengthened spiritually** to be able to receive all God's blessings. This is all so logical if you're familiar with Paul's exposition in Ephesians of the wonderful things God wants to do for his own people. The immensity of God's blessings may make us see our inadequacy. As **Stuart Briscoe** has remarked, we need to be like the little boy who was heard to say as he fell into a barrel of his favourite treat, molasses, **“Lord, make my capacity equal to this opportunity!”** (Let's Get Moving, 1978, p. 70).

There are two elements here. One is derived from **God's sheer wealth**. Notice Paul says, "I pray **that according to the riches of God's glory**, he may grant **that you may be strengthened in your inner being...**" (3:16a). It's futile to come to a pauper with your requests, no matter how moving and passionate your appeal may be. It's futile to go to a bank where all the money has been withdrawn. But **to go to the One "from whom, and through whom, and to whom are all things"** (Rom. 11:36) is a **totally different thing**. God gives "**according to his riches,**" that is, he gives out of a **vast storehouse that can never be exhausted**. Such are the resources from which he strengthens us. God's resources will never peter out. We can and will never be shortchanged. God can and will be infinitely generous.

The other element in our strengthening is **the agency of God's Holy Spirit**. "I pray that according to **the riches of God's 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**" (3:16b-17a). See how the entire resources of the Holy Trinity are at work here! And notice, **God's Spirit especially orchestrates the endowment of the strength** that God so generously gives. By the quiet, gentle work of God's Spirit in our lives, we are renewed and empowered for life, and we are able to grow stronger and stronger in our Christian faith, even while our bodies may be growing weaker and older. "**So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day**" (2 Cor. 4:16). Christians may be frail containers but, **because of the prayers of others and because of the work of God's Spirit**, we are able to carry on with divine power.

In this way **we become filled with Christ's presence**. Paul's prayer is that "Christ ... may dwell in [our] hearts through faith." Of course we have faith in him – that begins our Christian journey, but Paul wants that faith to grow. Our Christian lives can be a beautiful, upward spiral: our spiritual capacity is strengthened according to God's riches by the power of God's Holy Spirit, so that we appropriate more and more of God's life; then also, the life of Christ fills us, and thus our capacity for more and more endurance, and more and more compassion enlarges. As we experience more and more of our Lord's character and grace in our lives we soar, ever onwards and upwards. We become filled with all the fullness of Christ. We become active, living Christians that can make a difference in the world.

This prayer for **inner and outer strengthening** wasn't a mere wish, but the bold petition of prayer by the Apostle Paul for God's Family, the Christian Church. It is also my prayer for you, and for myself too.

2. A prayer for a great love (Ephesians 3:17b-19a).

Then **Paul goes on to pray for more love**. He wants us to be **“rooted and grounded in love”** (3:17b). Paul mixes his metaphors here: “rooted” is agricultural, and “grounded” is architectural, but their significance is perfectly parallel. **Like trees**, our lives are to send roots deep and wide into the soil of God's love; **like buildings**, the edifices of our lives here on earth are to have deep, solid foundations of love. If we are properly “rooted” and constructed on a foundation of love nothing will be able to shake us.

You may think this is all rather straightforward and inconsequential, but I hasten to remind you that **so many of our lives are askew because of a lack of a deep sense of love**. A proper sense of self-esteem may be lacking because we have not been properly praised. A proper sense of security may be lacking because we have not been properly raised. And, some in their growing up years may have had too much criticism, and even emotional and physical abuse. I can tell you, it happened to me. My earthly father wasn't one to praise or to speak kindly to his kids. Honestly, in spite of the stability and balance that my mother provided, our family was largely dysfunctional. So it wasn't surprising that my siblings and I found affirmation in the church family. Being rooted and grounded in God's love in Christ gave us what we needed. Perhaps that is why three of us are Christian ministers today.

Paul prays this because **Christian love** – God's unadulterated, deeply sacrificial love in Christ, agape love – **is absolutely crucial to the viability and ministry of the Christian family**. There's no use ministering out of our leaky tanks. No, our tanks need to be patched and filled up with God's love in Christ so that we are free to minister to others out of his abundance, not out of our own needy needs and wants.

Having prayed for a proper sense of rooted-ness and grounded-ness of God's love in each individual believer, **Paul turns his focus**, upward and outward, **to the cosmic love of Christ, praying for the Christian family's growing sense of its boundless dimensions**: “I pray,” he writes, “that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length, and height and depth [of God's love], and to know the love of Christ that

surpasses knowledge...” (3:18-19a). It’s no small thing, this love of God and love of Christ. It’s a big, big thing. It’s a big deal.

Nearly 39 years ago when I met my wife, Colleen, I immediately fell “head over heels” in love. I was crazy about her, although it took me several years to realize it and to tell her about it. Believe it or not, I was shy. And given my upbringing, I still had a lot to learn about what love meant. But I loved the way she looked – her blue eyes, her long, beautiful hair, the tone of her voice, her laugh, her positive outlook on life, the aroma of her perfume, her faith and so on, and, ultimately, her love and respect for me. That love grew and grew. And when I finally told her that I loved her – and that meant I wanted to marry her – and we were married, I felt like I couldn’t love her more, but I was wrong. The soul-exchange of the years, the joys and woes of parenthood, the mutual love for our children (and now for our grandchildren), the times of our cancer diagnoses and treatment, and our ministry together, has fostered a love that’s continued to grow deeper and deeper. **I now know that there’s even greater love ahead.** I have an incalculable love for my wife. It is, to be sure, finite and flawed, but there is no instrument that can measure it.

I say this for contrast, because what our text calls us to consider is the infinite love of God in Christ. The “four magnitudes” of its dimension – its measureless “breadth and length, depth and height” -- are but suggestions, approximations for the infinitude of God’s love. We mustn’t be too fanciful about these, as **John Calvin** tells us some church fathers, like Augustine and Ambrose, were (Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, vol. 2, Eerdmans, 1974, p. 168).

Nevertheless, these dimensions can be said to suggest that **it is a love that is wide enough to embrace the world.** “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16).

It is a love that lasts long enough to last forever. “Love never ends.” “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:8, 13). As preacher **Charles Spurgeon** once said: “It is so long that your old age cannot wear it out, so long your continual tribulation cannot exhaust it; your successive temptations shall not drain it dry; like eternity itself, it knows no bounds” (The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, vol. 12, Pasadena, 1973, p. 478).

It is a love that is high enough to take us beyond this world. “See what love the father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 Jn. 3:1-2).

And it is a love that is deep enough to take Christ to the very depths to reach the lowest, most hopeless sinner on earth (Php. 2:5-8; 1 Pe. 3:18-20a).

These “four magnitudes” describe an infinite, incomprehensible love. Christ’s love is indeed incomprehensible; nevertheless, **Paul prays for our increasing comprehension**, “that [we] may have the power to comprehend...” (3:18), that we may “take hold of, seize, and appropriate” (G. Abbot-Smith, A Greek Manual of the New Testament, p. 235), what God’s love in Christ is all about. He knows it’s impossible, but he calls us to take up this strenuous, thoughtful exercise for the health of our souls. **And we don’t just do this thinking and plumbing of the immensities of God’s love alone, we do it together, “with all the saints,”** with all the theologians and ordinary Christians who’ve ever thought about it throughout the ages, and with those who are thinking even now about it now with us. **We don’t think about God’s love in solitary; we do it community.**

There’s **another request by Paul regarding God’s love in Christ**, and that is **that it may become experiential**. Mere head knowledge isn’t enough. He wants us **“to know the love of Christ [in a way] that surpasses knowledge”** (3:19a). This knowledge can’t just be a matter of the intellect; it needs to be of the heart. **Samuel Rutherford**, a Scottish theologian and commissioner to the Assembly that produced the lofty words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, one of the subordinate standards of our faith, once wrote from a prison cell in Aberdeen, “Love, love (I mean Christ’s love), is the hottest coal that I ever felt. Oh, but [even] the smoke of it is hot! Cast all the salt sea upon it, it will flame on; ...many, many waters will not quench [Christ’s] love” (Hugh Martin, Selected Letters of Samuel Rutherford, London: SCM, 1957, p. 43).

For those who haven’t experienced this love, no words will suffice. For those who’ve experienced, no words will quite do.

3. A prayer for a fullness of God's presence in our lives (Eph. 3:19b).

Paul's final petition is **that his Church Family "may be filled with all the fullness of God"** (3:19b). This is a staggering thought, for this fullness is the fullness with which God fills himself! How can we comprehend it? It's like what **Joy Davidman**, who later became C. S. Lewis' wife, described as she came into the **"a direct perception of God"** from a former life of atheism and Marxism, loneliness and hopelessness.

"It is infinite, unique; there are no other words, there are no comparisons. **Can one scoop up the sea in a teacup?** Those who have known God will understand me; the others, I find, can neither listen nor understand. **There was a Person with me ... directly present to my consciousness** – a Person so real that all my previous life was by comparison mere shadow play. And I myself was **more alive than I had ever been**; it was like waking from sleep. So intense a life cannot be endured for long by flesh and blood; we must ordinarily take our life watered down, diluted as it were, by time and space and matter. My perception of God lasted perhaps half a minute."

"In that time, however, many things happened. I forgave some of my enemies. I understood that God had always been there, and that, since childhood, I had been pouring half my energy into the task of keeping him out. I saw myself as I really was, with dismay and repentance; and seeing, I changed. I have been turning into a different person since that half minute, everyone tells me."

(These Found the Way, ed. David Wesley Soper, 1951, p. 23)

What a prayer Paul has given us! Within this amazing torrent of devotion, **Paul has prayed for our apprehension of God's strength** in our weakness, **God's love** in our insecurities, **and God's fullness** in our emptiness. What more can we want or need? No much. And, **it bring us, as it does Paul, to doxological praise**: "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (3:20-21).

Amen

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