

10-6-19 SERMON CCI Ephesians 3: 12b- 21 Paul's Prayer for the Church

Prayer is an important part of walking by faith. It's important for us as individual Christians, and it's important as a church. You're in an exciting yet scary time in your history as you go through the process of calling a new pastor. It's important for the pastoral search committee to bathe their work in prayer, and it's important for each of us to pray for the church. But **what** should we pray for as we pray for the church? In this morning's scripture reading we hear one of Paul's prayers for the churches that he started in Ephesus. It's a big hairy audacious prayer! So let's explore Paul's prayer to see what Paul cared about when it came to the church.

Paul wrote the letter of Ephesians to encourage the churches in Ephesus. He had spent 3 years teaching and preaching in Ephesus before he continued on his missionary journey to other places. They had shared many exciting days together as people kept putting their faith in Jesus and the churches grew. And they had faced real obstacles together, sometimes putting their lives in danger. The Ephesian Christians were dear to Paul's heart and Paul was dear to them. Paul was concerned that his sufferings after he left would discourage them and make them lose heart. After all, none of us want people who are dear to us to suffer.

Have you ever felt the weight of knowing that someone's love for you caused them to suffer? I read the intriguing true story of an American Catholic missionary to Japan. After years of ministering among the Japanese people, word came back to America that he had renounced his faith. One of his ministry students from America traveled over to Japan to find out if it was true. He found the now elderly priest in prison and learned that the priest had been arrested for preaching the Christian faith and had been tortured to get him to renounce his faith, but he had held strong against the terrible torture. But then the government tried a new tactic. Instead of physically torturing the priest, they began torturing and killing his parishioners right outside his prison window so that he could hear their suffering. His parishioners would continue to suffer and die until he renounced Christ. To save his parishioners, he chose to do what the government wanted- step on an icon of the face of Christ, trusting that God knew his heart. I'm not going to judge his decision; that's between him and God. But the grief he had because of his parishioners' suffering was like what the Ephesians were experiencing because of Paul's suffering, and Paul did not want them to lose heart. So Paul prayed for them and all who would read his letter- friends, that includes us.

The first thing Paul prayed for was “That out of God’s glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.” Paul prayed that when we’re losing heart over a situation, when we’re weighed down with the weight we’re carrying, when we’re tempted to give up, “God, please strengthen them in their inner self with your Spirit’s power.” The inner being is the control room within each of us where our decisions are made. This is the place we need the most help. Paul prayed that deep in that inner place, the Spirit would strengthen us with spiritual power. Because only then will the prayers we ask and the decisions we make be made from faith, not fear or discouragement. First things need to be first. So Paul prayed first for our spiritual strength.

Most of our prayers, and this includes me, tend to fall into two categories: 1) Pain avoidance “Lord, this hurts, make it stop.” and 2) Change the situation, “Lord, I don’t like this. Change it, please.” It’s natural to pray that our pain would stop and that our circumstances would improve. No one enjoys living a difficult life. The problem is, if that’s all we pray for, we’re missing the real power of prayer. In all his prayers found in scripture, Paul never mentions praying for either category-avoiding pain or changing our circumstances. He had more important things to pray for. Do you know where Paul was when he wrote Ephesians? He was in prison in Rome. Yet he didn’t ask them to, “Pray that I will get out of here,” but rather “Pray that I will be bold for Christ even though I am in chains.” Paul understood the power of praying first things first.

And what happens when we first pray to be strengthened in our inner selves? I’ll give you a secret: it’s not giving us the things we tend to pray for- pain avoidance and rescue from our situation. Listen to verse 17: “That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” The word translated “dwell” comes from two smaller Greek words: kata meaning “down” and oikos meaning “house” or “home.” When we pray for strength, Christ becomes “down home” in our heart. It’s the picture of a person at home in their own house. We all know there is a difference between a house and a home. A house is a building; a home is a dwelling place. It is very possible for Christ to be “in” our hearts but not be “at home” there. Just like us. Let’s say someone invites Rob and me to come to their home for dinner, and as we enter they tell us, “Come in, make yourselves at home.” And while we are at their house, we admire their home, their furniture is comfortable, the food delicious and the conversation engaging. We could have a delightful time, but it wouldn’t be home to us. Paul says that when we pray for what matters most to God first, Christ becomes more and more at home within

our hearts; he's not just an occasional guest we clean ourselves up for and entertain, but then go back to "normal life" after he leaves.

Many years ago Robert Boyd Munger wrote a little booklet called *My Heart, Christ's Home*. In it he describes the believer's heart as a home with many rooms. Most of us have some parts of our heart we gladly welcome Jesus into. All the rooms where we behave well, and have good attitudes and healthy thoughts. Most of us also keep some areas of ourselves off-limits to him because wherever Jesus is, he tends to shine light and things we like to keep hidden come into view. The more we hide, the less Christ is at home in us. As the Spirit strengthens our inner being though, Christ becomes at home in us and we experience the joy of Christ's presence.

In verse 18 Paul prayed that we will have the *"power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."* Think of that- that we will grasp, understand, finally get our heads wrapped around, how huge is the love of Christ. Oh, we know God loves us, and God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. But it takes time and faith experience, even getting knocked around a bit, to get our heads wrapped around how big that love is. If, when we struggle in life, we wonder if God loves us anymore, our grasp is too small. If we pray and when the answer doesn't come, we ask, "What did I do wrong that God is not answering my prayer?" Our understanding of God's love is too small. Or if we look around at the people God calls us to love and think, "Surely not that one, look at how he or she lives," or "Not that one, why, they treated me badly," or "Not them, they don't worship like we do," or "They love the wrong kind of people." Our understanding of God's love is too small. Paul prays for us that we may grow in our experience of the love of Christ- his love for us, and also his love for others. Notice that Paul prayed that we will grow in this along with all God's holy people. You see, we don't learn about God's love alone; we learn about it as God's people together. In how we care for one another, when we fail each other and still forgive one another. Through a compassionate touch or kind encouraging voice, or sharing the load. But sadly, sometimes we don't. I did a memorial service once for an older man who was gay and kept pretty much to himself. He grew up in the church but somewhere along the way, the people of his church made it very clear he was not welcome because he was gay, and he had never been part of a church again. His

nephew told me this man stopped believing God could love him because if God's people couldn't love him, how could God? Friends, God's love surpasses everything we've ever been taught about it; every story and fact and bit of knowledge we know just barely scratches the surface of the height and depth and width and length of his love. Paul prayed that we would grow more and more in our understanding of God's love. Because if our view of God's love is small, our love for others who need to know God loves them will be small too.

Paul ends his prayer for the church of Christ with a grand doxology: ²⁰ *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,* ²¹ *to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!* And all God's people say, "Amen." Just as God's love is bigger than we know, the same is true of his power. God has the power to do more than all we can ask or imagine; no, not just more, **immeasurably** more. Ever feel like something is too big, too impossible, to pray for? Revive this church into a growing alive body that draws people to come learn more about our amazing God? **This** church? Too big. Imagine God can heal the relationship that breaks our heart? Too big. Imagine God can change hearts and minds that are stuck in a rut? Too big. Imagine that there could be kids here again wiggling and squirming, and babies crying trying to drown out the preacher? Too big. Imagine that this church could have a Christian voice in Issaquah again? Too big. Paul prays to the God who has the power to do things we struggle to even imagine. Picture God looking down on us here this morning. He knows what this church has accomplished in the past- all the people you've reached for Christ, missionaries you've supported, mission trips you've gone on, ministries you've done. He knows about the ways you've served the poor and homeless. And God knows where you are today- the obstacles you face, the hopes you have in a new pastor, the doubts that linger - "Do we have enough energy to try again? What if it doesn't work? What if we can't change?" And I picture God saying, "Community Church of Issaquah, I can do more than you have yet asked or thought. But first things first: Ask me to strengthen you by my Spirit so you can pray and live in faith, not fear. Invite me to be at home in all your heart, not just part. Ask me to show you how big my love is so you can show that love outside these walls. Please ask me. Once you've prayed all that, then ask me anything in faith. First things first. Try me."