

St. Paul's Prayer for Us
Ephesians 3:14-21

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When I was in seminary, I took a class on preaching. I don't remember much about the class, it was so many years ago, but I do remember a comment my preaching professor made about our scripture this morning. My professor, Dr. Fred Craddock, was raised in the mountains of Tennessee in a small church that insisted he memorize scripture. When speaking about Ephesians 3:14-21, he requested that we read it to our congregations with grace and dignity - not with schmaltzy sentimentality. This is a prayer from the heart and needs to be read with integrity, not drama.

St. Paul wrote this prayer for the faithful in Ephesus. It is clear that Paul has a deeply heartfelt desire for the Christians in Ephesus to know the power of Christ's love at the core of their beings.

In our scripture, Paul prays for God to grant the Ephesians strength in their inner being through the power of the Holy Spirit and that Christ might dwell in their hearts through faith, so they may be rooted and grounded in love. Paul continues his prayer requesting that the Ephesians 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 they may be filled with the fullness of God.

This is a glorious prayer. It conveys a cosmic understanding of the essence of God that is intimately intertwined in the hearts of believers through the gift of Jesus Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit. The key word in this prayer is "power." Paul uses it twice praying that we might know the power of God in our inner spirits and we might have the power to comprehend the fullness of God. The Greek word for power is "dynamis," or dynamite. Paul is speaking of an explosive power that transforms the way faithful people throughout the generations see the world.

Paul first prays that we might know the power, the explosive power of God's presence, in our inner being so we might be rooted and grounded in love.

The other day I was talking with an Episcopal Priest about his prayer life. He told me that during vacation a few weeks ago he went to New York City with his wife and teenage son. While they were walking on Fifth Ave, they passed St. Patrick's Cathedral and decided to go inside. St. Patrick's is in the heart of NYC on the corner of 5th Avenue and 50th St. The hustle and bustle of NYC happens right in front of the church. He said he was struck by the transformation that happened to the people as they left the noise of the city, entered the narthex and then the nave of the church.

There was a visible calm that came over them as they moved into an inner place of reverence and prayer.

Having watched this happen to the people visiting St Patrick's, he realized he had a similar experience during his practice of contemplative prayer each day. At first, his prayer begins in the narthex where he notices the activity that is going on in his mind but tries to leave it behind – much like taking off outer clothing in a mudroom on a winter's day. Then there is a movement from this time of releasing active thoughts to a more inner place of quiet and stillness, resting in a vast presence of God's light and love. Celtic spirituality teacher, John Philip Newell, talks of this place as listening to the heartbeat of God. It is a place where we rest in a vastness of love and are filled with its power.

St Paul writes: I pray that you may be strengthened in your inner being with the power through Christ's spirit, ... so you are rooted and grounded in love.

Paul then goes on to pray that we might have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ... so we may be filled with all the fullness of God.

It is a beautiful thing to comprehend being filled with the fullness of God! This God is cosmic – vast – eternal – everlasting – massive – encompassing – bigger than our wildest imagination and we have the opportunity to know the fullness of God through the power of Christ's spirit.

One of the ways we can explore the wonder of the vastness of God's presence is through the gift of creation. I have a friend who is a wonderful photographer. A few weeks ago, he was in the Adirondack Mountains. His brother told him that if he woke in the middle of the night he'd see a great sighting of the Milky Way. He decided to take some photos and took the most spectacular picture of the Milky Way Galaxy with star after star filling the entire sky with light and wonder. It was as though the vast glory of God's creation blanketed the earth. Ninth century mystic, John Scotus Eriugena, taught the flow of God's light is at the core of all things – the light of God glows out of each star and each of us.

There is a simple prayer for light I love to pray each morning:

O Gracious One, illumine by heart with your light.
Let my eyes be light and my ears be light.
Let there be light on my right and light on my left.
Let there be light above me and light below.
Let there be light in front of me and light behind.
O Holy One, make me a light.

This is what St. Paul is praying for in our scripture this morning. That we might know the power, the vastness, the wonder, the eternal light of God that is in all things including each of us. When we know this power of light that shines out from our inner beings, we bring light to God's world.

O Gracious One, illumine our hearts with your light.

Let our eyes be light and our ears be light.

Let there be light on our right and light on our left.

Let there be light above us and light below.

Let there be light before us and light behind.

O Holy One, make us a light.

Amen.

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