

Today we turn to the hinge passage in the letter to the Ephesians. The first two chapters are about what God has done in Jesus Christ. God has chosen us from the foundations of the world to be reconciled to God's glory. Then the last few chapters are about how we are to live as his church together as one body, the body of Christ. And sandwiched right in the middle is this prayer for the church. So hear this prayer as a prayer for our church, Fort Hill Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Listen for the word of the Lord.

**Ephesians 3:14-21**

3:14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,

3:15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.

3:16 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,

3:17 and that Christ may dwell in your through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

3:18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth,

3:19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

3:20 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,

3:21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

**Proclamation of the Word**

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Think of all the great prayers you know by heart:

The Lord's Prayer

The Prayer of St. Francis- Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace...

The Blessing of Aaron from Numbers 6:22ff-

*The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*

But of all the great prayers of the church, I do not know that anyone regularly prays this big prayer.

Now consider the daily things you and I might pray for, we usually pray for a test, a problem, a loved one, safety, provision, healing. But Paul prays BIG!!! Falling down on his knees he prays the faithful, the church. He prays for the church, that despite divisions, in our unity we may be a faithful witness to what God has done, is doing, and will do through Jesus Christ, who is our peace.

And we have to ask why. Our passage begins "for this reason"- Basically because God has included us Gentiles into the covenant by the grace and work of Jesus Christ. Christ has torn down the dividing wall and brought us by grace through faith into the household of God. While it is human nature to build walls, to divide ourselves, God's desire is to bring all of us together into the family of God. We may fracture, splinter, divide as you discussed last week, but God desires reconciliation. Jesus suffered on the cross and rose again to create newness and a new people. God loves us all together.

Because of that Paul prays this Big, Big Prayer! Do we pray big prayers? Are our prayers big enough?

I think about the church. Do we get caught up in little insignificant things, and forget God's purposes? Do you we get focused on the color of the carpet, the fact that worship went over four minutes, or the petty behavior and forget our purpose: to tell and demonstrate the good news of Jesus Christ and to live as his body on earth. Christians have done this forever, get side tracked by divisions, and forget the higher calling of being the church. Just look at the Ephesians. One group thumbed their nose at the other, declaring they were the truest Christians, the better Christians.

Last weekend we were in Charleston for a nephew's wedding. Before coming home on Sunday, we decided to walk around the homes on the Battery in the 98 degree heat before being in the car for 4 hours. We wandered down Meeting street and stumbled upon the Calhoun Mansion- home of Patrick Calhoun, grandfather of John C. Well, the men decided they had no interest in the interior, but Hallie and I were curious. We bought tickets and went in. In fact, it was built by a sea merchant, a Mr. Williams, whose main goal was to show off his wealth. Every elaborate detail was made to show his wealth and success. Human nature is such, to show superiority. As my uncle reminded me in a conversation about race recently, "Everybody is looking for somebody to look down upon just to feel better about himself."

Christians are not immune! Perhaps you have had that experience. Some Christians see themselves as superior Christians. I had a conversation with a woman recently who recounted about her daughter's involvement in the church. While the family was Episcopalian, the daughter, Angie, found herself involved with the Christian group InterVarsity at University. She was exploring her own faith, a natural part of growing and maturing. She grew in her faith in new ways. After college, Angie fell in love with a good Christian young man, of another denomination. The couple married and became very involved in that church. In their first year of marriage Angie and her husband felt led to serve as missionaries in the former Soviet Union, to take the gospel to those who had not heard. Christianity was no longer illegal. It was the early '90s. So Angie's supportive Episcopalian parents went to the commissioning service. The pastor introduced Angie by saying, "Now Angie did not grow up in a Christian church, but now she has been saved, and has dedicated her life to Christ now." After the service, Angie's mother made a bee line to the pastor, introduced herself, and said, "I will have you know that Angie grew up in a Christian home. I prayed for Angie everyday to know the love of Christ and to serve him faithfully. That is why she is doing what she is doing today. God has been at work in her life a long time."

Interestingly, Angie and her family are now members of an Episcopal mission church. She has integrated the different ways God has shaped her faith. It is undeniable that God has been at work in her life and in the church. Sometimes we underestimate the work of God, but God does more than we ask or imagine.

While the conflict for the Ephesians was between the Jewish Christians and the Gentiles Christians, we have all been living in a church conflict for most of our lives. In the 1920's the Fundamentalist-Modernist split occurred. Most of the fights/debates/controversies we have had in the last one hundred years are rooted in this conflict. What cultural flashpoint happened? Charles Darwin.

Fundamentalist take an orthodox approach reading the Bible literally while the Modernists take an approach that considers science, history, and other forms of knowledge to inform faith and reading of scripture. Modernists like our church believes in the authority of the Bible as the inspired word of God which points us to Jesus Christ. A fundamentalist church believes the Bible to be the inerrant word of God. Inspired vs. inerrant- both believe in the authority of Scripture. Consider that most conflicts in the church today are over Biblical interpretation. Most fit into these two camps. It is what is painfully ripping beloved institutions like Erskine College a part. Erskine is a part of our cousin denomination, the ARP church.

Let me give you a current example: a modernist would think that scientists agree that humans are rapidly increasing climate change. Such understanding should inform our faith and witness. Fundamentalists would say that climate change has nothing to do with faith if it even exists. The Bible does not discuss climate change, a fundamentalist would argue. On the other hand, modernists would look at the Biblical witness and believe God gave humanity the earth to steward and care for as a call to address climate conditions. That is a grave oversimplification, but you get the point. Most conflicts of the larger church today are rooted in this conflict over biblical interpretation and an orientation towards modernism or fundamentalism. Some scholars claim that this is the exact same schism we are seeing fought in the Islamic faith today. Part of what the world is witnesses is a huge rift over interpretation in the Muslim faith. Some Muslims denounce all violence, others commit violence in the name of Allah, for example.

We need to pray for the church of Jesus Christ even as we pray for our neighbors of other faiths. Perhaps we can pray as Paul prays for the children of God in three ways. He prays first that we are strengthened in our inner being by the Holy Spirit. Secondly, he prays that Christ will dwell within us so we will know the width, breadth, height, breadth of love of God. And finally, he prays that we may be filled with the fullness of God. We pray for strength, love, and fullness.

First, Paul prays that we will be strengthened by the Holy Spirit. Challenges to our faith assault us daily. Of course, we need the inner strength that the Holy Spirit provides. In order to keep our hearts, minds, and wills trained on Jesus, we need strength. God does not promise the life of faith whether

personally or as a church will be simple and easy. In fact, Jesus offers us a cross and says, "follow me." Challenges will exist, so we need to pray for the inner strength the Holy Spirit provides.

As I walk through the Education building, I was struck that it looked like a bomb had gone off. I was reminded of images of war-torn countries. Yet deconstruction and demo has to happen before the reconstruction, before the new is rebuilt. The same thing happens to us. Sometimes a crisis of faith or a life crisis causes a deconstruction, a stripping away, so that something new can be constructed, formed, shaped. That requires inner strength. The challenges of a renovation whether of the building or our ministries requires the same. So pray for our church, not just the renovation, but our search committee seeking an Associate Pastor, our Christian Ed. ministry who has been renovating programmatically to strengthen how we grow of disciples. **Do you pray for the church to be strengthened? Let's commit to pray for our church.**

Secondly, Paul prays that we know the love of Christ. Paul is not praying that we have power, but that we have love. Being rooted and grounded in love, we do all things through Christ who strengthens us. All we do in church, how we treat one another, and the focus of our mission is to so we may know the love of God in Jesus Christ. God loves us all together. The kind of knowledge Paul writes of is so much more than head knowledge. It is the knowing that a child has when he cries, he can trust that loving arms will pick him up, hold and comfort him. He is safe, loved. It is an experienced love. So let's pray that our actions, decisions, and treatment of one another is rooted and grounded in the love of God in Christ first loved us. How does love act?

*<sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7, NRSV)*

This is how God in Jesus Christ loves us. We could switch the word love for God. God is patient; God is kind; ..." This is how we are called to show love because we know God first loved us. Love is the most blessed chain reaction in the universe. If it is true that violence begets violence, it is also true that love begets love. In light of a shooting in a movie theater on Thursday, a shooting the week before of 4 servicemen, the Lord knows, we need a 'love chain reaction' like we experienced after the Charleston shooting.

**Let's pray that we know the height, depth, breath, and width of God's love and in turn, live it.**

Finally, Paul prays that we will know the fullness of God. If God created us to glorify God, then we must be filled with God-ness to be fully human. To be fully human is to reflect the image of Christ. You know people like this. You meet them and they glow. They ooze the peace and love of Christ. They have no anger, no wrath, no malice. You just know it being in their presence that they are filled with the fullness of God. It is with such a fullness that we can pray with the psalmist, "You, LORD, are all I

have, and you give me all I need; my future is in your hands" (Ps. 16:5, GNB). I hope guests come into the sanctuary, encounter us, encounter God, and know the fullness of God.

**Let's pray that our church may be filled with the fullness of God.**

Paul ends his prayer in praise, full-on doxology, "Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine be all glory." God and humanity united in love. The Redeemer and the redeemed reconciled. The Bridegroom and the Bride, Christ and his church together bringing glory to God.

Of all the great prayers we pray, this prayer is the one we need today for the church to be filled with the power, the love, and the fullness of God to the glory of God.

Will you commit this week to pray for our church that we might be strengthened? that we might be rooted and grounded in the love of Christ, and that we may experience the fullness of God?

Strength, love, fullness.

May it be so to the glory and praise of God. Let the church say Amen.

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