

With the Saints

Ephesians 3:14-21

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14 For 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.

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

On Friday afternoon, I drove to Austin for the Regional Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the Southwest. In terms of usual travel time and distance, it's not a horrible drive. But, there is something about Friday afternoon on Interstate 35 that throws normal out the window. There was traffic. There was an accident. There was construction. There were buses and semis making both national and international trips. There were school buses moving football players and bands to their Friday night games. There were Longhorns and Mountaineers. At one point when traffic came to a screeching halt, my inner kid came out. "How much longer?" "Are we there yet?"

If you've ever traveled with kids for any above normal distance, you know that question is likely to come up. I remember a trip with JYF kids early in my ministry. These Third, Fourth, and Fifth grade students were excited about their trip to Six Flags, but the six hour trip to Dallas was a challenge for them. One kid kept asking one of the adult sponsors, "How much longer?" She replied, "Just 30 more minutes." In actuality, we still had about three hours to go. About 30 minutes later, the same kid asked again about how much longer it would be. And the same adult replied, "Just 30 more minutes." And this continued for the remaining hours of the trip. Sometimes all we need is a response.

The question of how much longer can be asked of many things. How much longer until my table is ready? How much longer until our kid is out of diapers? How much longer until I get a promotion? How much longer until the gang is back together again? How much longer until I can retire? And when we get the horrible diagnosis, how much longer do I have to live? We want to know these things so that we can measure – so that we can allot the proper time, allow for proper expenditure, and put boundaries and limits on our goals, our time, and our patience.

The fact is, you and I are constantly measuring. Some of us turn on our GPS even if we know the way because we want to measure the travel time or see when we will arrive. Some of us like to measure the number of Christmas decorations we display versus our neighbors. There are even some of us who would like to measure the distance between here and heaven.

The Bible may not be much help to us in improving our arrival time or in winning the neighborhood decorating contest, but it does give us some understanding of the distance between us and those who have gone before us. It's actually a lot closer than we might think. We are actually one church in two

locations. There is the church “triumphant” – the communion of the saints – and the church “militant” – those of us here on earth – those of us still in the battle, the struggle, in this life. And on All Saints Sunday, we sing of that reality:

*O blest communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.
Alleluia! Alleluia!*^f

Yet, the emphasis is not on the difference between the struggle we face and the glorious fellowship they experience. The emphasis is on Jesus Christ. We are one in Christ. We are part of one church, because we all belong to him. Paul got this. And that’s why his prayer to God for the Ephesians in our scripture lesson this morning was offered for both churches – both for the church in Ephesus and for the saints who had gone before.

All of our scripture lesson from Ephesians 3:14-21 is that prayer. These seven verses are actually only two sentences in the Greek.ⁱⁱ But that aside, it’s kind of a “Goldilocks” prayer – not too long; not too short; just right. And we get a clue that this is more than just an average prayer in verse 14. Paul prays: “For this reason I bow my knees...” The usual custom in the days of the early church was to stand for prayer. This was because the Jewish pattern they had grown up with consisted of standing with the hands stretched out and the palms upward.ⁱⁱⁱ But kneeling was a much more emotive way of praying. Kneeling was a gesture generally reserved for a person begging for a favor from a powerful or important person. When one knelt

before another, he or she was expressing their deep emotion – his or her deep need for the other.

This kind of intensity and emotion is evident in Paul’s prayer. But Paul wasn’t asking for himself. But it’s not a prayer for his own benefit. No, the insight and spiritual strengthening the apostle prays that the readers in Ephesus might experience is a community benefit – something for the whole church; those reading and hearing the letter, and with all the saints. Or to say it another way, Paul was clear that the strength and insight he was about to pray for wouldn’t come via a lonely spiritual quest, but through participation in the body.^{iv}

The apostle’s inspired prayer cut to the heart of everything. In fact, it mirrors the Gospel – the good news for you and me. If you listen closely, you hear echoes of John 3:16. He begins by noting where every family in heaven and on earth takes its name – from God. In a few short words, once again the distance between heaven and earth is brought near. But, this prayerful focus wasn’t about human families, both here and in the communion of saints. It was about God. It’s about God’s greatness. It was about how God is the Creator and sustainer of all the structures in which earthly and heavenly beings are organized.^v And what that means is that everything belongs to God because everything was created by God. *For God so loved the world...*

Having acknowledged that all of the world is God’s, Paul continues. “According to the riches of your glory, grant that...” your people might be rooted and grounded in love. Rooted and grounded. These are images of things that happen internally, beneath the surface. But these internal things make all the difference externally. Roots provide nutrients to the plant to help leaves push out and flowers to blossom. Deeply grounded and broad roots provide stability to the tree as it sways in the

wind. In much the same way, Paul prayed that God might nourish and provide a steadfast backbone to the church. However, this wasn't a self-help kind of prayer. Paul wasn't praying that the church might develop the moral character trait of love. He was praying that they might fully recognize that love is the sphere of their existence. That they might know that they live in a world of love – a world created and sustained by God's love. And being properly rooted and grounded in that love, they would bloom where they were planted.

That kind of blooming started with knowledge and understanding. Understanding and knowing just how much God loved them and the world. Paul prayed that they, together with the saints, might understand...know...comprehend the measure of God's love made known in Jesus Christ. We hear again the echo: *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...* Paul wasn't praying that the church would be filled with knowledge of that love – that they could quote Bible verses or theologians or church history. His prayer was that the church might be filled with the experience of the love of Christ. That they might be filled to overflowing with the fullness of Christ.

Think about the saints we remembered this morning or of others who influenced your life. Did they impact you because of what they knew or because of what they did? How they lived out what they knew? I suspect you were impacted by experiencing the love of Christ through them. And it's that kind of fullness that allows us to truly measure the breadth, length, height, and depth of God's love in Jesus Christ. If the Ephesians got this, Paul prayed, no longer would they be the kids in the backseat asking questions. Instead, strengthened by the Spirit, they would have the answer to "how much wider?", "how much longer?", "how much

taller?”, and “how much deeper?” God’s love really was in their lives and in the world...and where they were planted.

In the play, *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*,” Snoopy has several random lines throughout. At one point, Snoopy says, “Sometimes I think I’ll just pull up stakes and move out of here. Broaden my horizons, meet new people. But something bind me to this spot, that old supper dish.”^{vi} We have a similar sort of binding to our church, on that Paul recognizes in the last part of his prayer. For having made these petitions for the hearts and minds of the church, Paul then concludes his prayer with a doxology about God’s power at work within the community of faith. And there is something unique about this offering of praise. It’s the only doxology in the New Testament to mention Christ and the church as the locus of praise – as the location; the place for this praise. “To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus...” The church, the Christian community in all generations – those of us here and those before us - is the visible sign and placement of God’s once-for-all act and continuing presence.^{vii} It’s here that we gather at a table each week. It’s here that, under the shadow of the cross, we remember Christ’s death on the cross for each of us. It’s here that we welcome the living presence of Christ in our midst as we share a loaf and cup, symbolic of his body broken and blood shed for each of us. And it’s here, on Sundays like this, that we give thanks that all of the church – those of us here today and those saints before us – will one day gather together for all of eternity at a banquet feast in heaven that never ends. To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Or to say it another way... We are together bound to a God who *so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.*

This kind of praise, this kind of remembrance, this kind of spiritual strengthening, this kind of experiential love finds expression and dimension in the church. It's not an individual act; it is something that is done with all of God's people – in the fellowship of the church. As John Wesley rightly notes, "God knows nothing of solitary religion." And that's why the church matters. It's why gathering here with the communion of the saints on All Saints Sunday matters. This is where we, together, hear the promises that this life is not the destination. We're not there yet.

This morning, we remember the saints who went before us. We remember how they shaped us. How they empowered us. How they provided for what we have today. All around us are the signs of their witness. We stand on their shoulders as we sit in the building they helped fashion, in a community they helped shape, with a legacy for the cause of Christ that they helped to champion.

But those of us here today, the church "militant", aren't supposed to sit back and just reap the benefits of that rich inheritance from these saints. Instead, our task is to be a saint as well. Just as we have been impacted by saints, we have to recognize that we are saints in someone else's life. To recognize that in our spheres of life are people we have influence with. It's an awesome responsibility...

Here in this season of Stewardship, in which we are thinking about our support for ministry and mission in 2019, we have to think about the influence we want to have. First Christian Church has been planted here, where we can impact students across the street, families in the neighborhood, the hungry and homeless who pass through our community. You have been planted here, where you can be a person of influence in your neighborhood, at your job, in your homes. And to be the church of influence we are called to be, we need to recognize the power that is at

work within us – the power of the Spirit and saints who went before who cheer us on today. We want to bloom where we are planted – that’s what the Spirit empowers us to do. It’s what the generations of saints before us imagined for us today.

The internal things we do make an external difference. And this week, as you consider how you might support ministry in this place, I hope you will offer more than an average prayer. Perhaps you need to get down on your knees and ask God how. To pray over your budget and ask, “How?” To pray over your calendar and ask, “How?” To think about all the gifts you’ve been given and ask, “How do I use these?” And as you do, I think you will find hope in this doxology in Ephesians 3. *Now to him that is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine.*

Immeasurably more. God can do even more than we can imagine.

God has done immeasurably more in the past. God is doing immeasurably more with us today. God will do immeasurably more tomorrow. Together with the saints, we sing, “To God be the glory, for the great things he has done,” is doing, and will do!

ⁱ *For All the Saints*. Words: William W. How, 1854. Music: Ralph Vaughn Williams, 1906. SINE NOMINE. *Chalice Hymnal*, #637.

ⁱⁱ Boring, M. Eugene and Fred B. Craddock. *The People’s New Testament Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. 604.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barclay, William. “The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians” in *The Daily Bible Study Series*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976. 128.

^{iv} Boring/Craddock

^v Ibid

^{vi} Schulz, Charles M. and Clark Gesner. *You’re A Good Man, Charlie Brown*. 1985. <https://quizlet.com/102664660/youre-a-good-man-charlie-brown-snoopy-lines-flash-cards/>

^{vii} Boring/Craddock