

## **Sermon Draft**

**Text: Ephesians 3:14–21**

**Sermon: Another Prayer**

Our Old Testament Reading recounts God's covenant with Noah and all living creatures never to destroy the earth by flood again. It also speaks of the sign of that covenant, the rainbow. Our Gospel reveals the power God's Son displays during a storm on Lake Gennesaret. He demonstrates his power over the storm first by walking on the waves, and second by quieting the wind and calming the waves once inside the boat. Safely ashore, Jesus demonstrates his power again as he heals the sick who were brought to him. Our Ephesians Epistle is a continuation of the letter, speaking of God's power, albeit of a different type.

Paul has been writing about God's plan to make the Gentiles heirs together with Israel through the Gospel. He notes his part in this plan: he was appointed as a preacher to the Gentiles and revealer of the mystery that was kept hidden from previous generations but accomplished in Christ Jesus. Part of what Christ accomplished for the Gentiles is the access that Gentiles now have to approach God with freedom and confidence.

Paul demonstrates this access to the Father as he offers prayer for his readers in the face of potential discouragement they may feel at his sufferings.

*“Teach us to pray,”* the disciples asked in Luke chapter 11. Jesus replied, *“When you pray, say . . .”* (Luke 11:1–2). But sometimes we have acted as though the Lord’s Prayer is the only prayer the New Testament teaches. Not so! This morning Paul interrupts his train of thought to offer a powerful prayer for those who face faith-shaking circumstances.

For the Ephesians, it was uncertainty about what would happen to them now that Paul was in prison. Would they be arrested too? Should they return to their old but safe religions? Paul prays as he does to calm their worries and fears.

How can you pray when members of your family, friends, or co-workers face faith-threatening situations? Paul teaches us to pray for those whose troubles may weaken their faith in Christ.

When one hears that a person is going through difficult times today, we often hear people say, “You’re in our thoughts”? Maybe we’ve even said it ourselves. But what can our thoughts accomplish? They have no power to change anything. We Christians can do better.

We can say that they are in our thoughts and prayers. We can pray *“that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . . that you may be filled with all the fullness of God”* (vs 17, 19). May you *“be filled with all the fullness of God.”*

That’s the climax to Paul’s prayer, but it summarizes all that he asks beforehand. What does it mean to be filled with the fullness of God? To pray that someone would be filled with the fullness of God is to ask that Jesus Christ dwell in that person. Faith is the only means by which Christ dwells in anyone’s heart.

So, Paul is really praying their faith will remain strong despite his imprisonment. The only way that faith remains strong is by God empowering it through the Spirit. And the only way that the Spirit empowers faint hearts is through the Gospel, whether it be read, heard, or received in the Supper. The Spirit never works apart from the Word, yet when some hearts are troubled and shaken, they turn away from hearing or reading the very Word that could strengthen them! If that absence continues, they’ll be running on empty!

When we see fellow members isolating themselves, we can offer more than, “I’ll be thinking of you.” Say, “I’m praying that God will fill you with all the fullness of Christ!” Nothing is as powerful as asking the Father to strengthen the anxious with his Spirit so that Christ would dwell in them. For the indwelling Christ brings peace, forgiveness, life, and salvation to those who are troubled by any fear or anxiety.

Paul’s prayer goes further. He also asks that his hearers may have the power to grasp the magnitude of Christ’s love for them ***“that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth”*** (vs 17–18). Often when we face difficult times, the question comes, “Why did God let this happen to me?” We all start out very limited in our grasp of God’s love for us: “Jesus loves me! This I know, For the Bible tells me so” (*LSB* 588:1).

The wise pray-er asks God to give the anxious person the power to see beyond his or her condition to the magnitude of Christ’s love for them.

Why would Paul pray that God would give his hearers the power to grasp the enormity of God's love? So, they won't lose heart! The devil loves nothing more than to isolate us, to make us believe we are insignificant, that God has better things to do, that he has better people to look after. He wants each of us to think, "Who am I among the billions of people, that God should help me?" After all, the statistics say North American Christianity is shrinking in numbers and influence.

That can make us feel insignificant, just as the Christians in Ephesus knew that they were an insignificant number of people too. Thanks to the Hubble Telescope, our understanding of the size of the universe continues to grow, but that can make us feel even more insignificant! Our planet seems like a mere speck of dust. Yet this is where God has focused his redeeming love. It was for fallen humanity that God sent his Son to set things right between himself, us, and all creation.

The fate of all human history reached its climax when one Jesus of Nazareth died in that insignificant little patch of land called Israel. But the enormity of God's love doesn't stop with Jesus' death and resurrection.

He sent apostles and missionaries throughout the world to get the word of life out. He saw to it that faithful parents, grandparents, or friends spoke that love to generations of people.

“You’re in our thoughts”? How about, “I’m also praying that God will help you see the enormous scope of his love for you, that he is not limited in the way that he can help you.”

Paul asks God that the Ephesians understand the enormity of God’s love in all of its fullness. But even more, he asks that they will experience that love for themselves in Christ so that they have more than just knowledge of it. What such a prayer envisions for those for whom you pray is like the difference between hearing about a great teacher’s techniques and watching that teacher use them in the classroom.

Christianity is not just a matter of knowing that God is love, for even the devils know that, much to their dismay. But it is also the experience of it that Paul prays for his hearers *“the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge”* (v 19).

How and when does that experience take place? Today folks will jump from one church to another trying to find the experience they're looking for. But the experience of God's love is not defined by a church's size, worship, or its architectural style. It is found where Jesus speaks to us in the Scriptures each week as we meet together. We experience that love as we hear him speak forgiveness through the Absolution, for Jesus said to the apostles, "***The one who hears you hears me***" (Luke 10:16). We experience that love as we receive him in the Sacrament as a pledge that he has given himself completely for us.

"You'll be in our thoughts"? How about, "I'm also praying that you will experience God's love as he gives it to you in worship and as the members of our church care for you"?

With his bold requests, does Paul exceed the limits of prayer? Does he ask too much of God? Is it okay for you to pray this way? Ought you be cautious not to expect too much? Not at all. Paul ends with words that give us confidence to pray as he did: "***Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations***" (vs 20–

21).

Let our desire for the people of this congregation be that of Paul that those for whom we pray would be filled with the fullness of God as Christ dwells in their hearts by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit, as he enables them to grasp just how great is his love for them in Christ Jesus, and as we and they experience that love in God's family.

Amen