

## The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany

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The Rev. C. Allen Kannapell

### Paul's Mighty Prayer

Lesson Referenced: Ephesians 3:1-21

In our course through Ephesians, we have seen that God chooses people to be His sons; that the Lord inspires them with hope; that He raises us from the dead; that He made us for good works; and that He has broken down the wall of hostility between us and God and the walls of hostility among men. This week we might be ready to hear what we, as Christians, should do. But in this week's passage, Paul does not address the Ephesian Christians to tell them how to act. Instead he prays.

Paul prays for the Ephesians. It's a matter first of God's action: if He wants us to know Him, He must first show Himself to us. The gap between us and God is so large that we cannot know Him unless He crosses it.

He has crossed it in Jesus: the Son of God has become human. But still we need our eyes to be opened so that we can see and recognize God in Him.

The Father reveals himself in the Son to all those He has chosen. It's not a given is it? Not Everyone recognizes God when they see Him. We know Him because first He shows us Himself.

So Paul prays. "I bow the knee before the Father" (Ephesians 3:14)

He submits and he prays. Here Paul leans heavily on God's power again. He has not yet appealed to the Ephesians. He hasn't asked them to do anything or behave in any way.

No – here he prays again for four things:

1. That you would be strengthened in your inner man.
2. That Christ would dwell in your hearts.
3. That you would comprehend and know the love of Christ.
4. That you would be filled with God.

#### **1. That you would be strengthened in your inner man.**

Did you know that you have an inner man? By inner man, Paul is not referring to a second

self but your true self – the new life that was born by the power of water and the spirit -- the new you, your new identity. If this hasn't happened to you yet then you are still dead in your sins no matter how religious you are.

God made the inner man. He took your dead spirit and raised it. As Paul says, "And you He made alive when you were dead in your sins and trespasses." (Ephesians 2:1)

The outer man is the man of flesh and the world, the husk of what once was alive but died in the fall.

The inner man is the child of God, the restoration of His image, the Son of God that God is creating in you, through His Holy Spirit. It seems that the inner man can remain weak. Jesus said of some that they received the word in shallow soil but though the seed sprouted there wasn't enough depth there for the word to survive in them. Paul's prayer that you would be strengthened in the inner man is a prayer that digs deep: God establish and finish what you've started in this one.

I look out at you, and I pray the same prayer especially for people who have just opened up to new life in Christ. Strengthen them, Lord, in their inner man.

## **2. That Christ would dwell in your hearts through faith**

This is an echo of the first prayer. When Christ lives in us, our inner man comes alive. You know Jesus wrecked every funeral He ever went to because the dead just couldn't stay that way around Him.

When Christ dwells in us, we can't help but be alive. He is He says the way, the truth and the life. He has life in himself. We might say that He is life itself.

Scientists will search in vain for the 100,000 missing links between inert matter and life. Christ is the link. Where He walks life springs up; where He dwells flowers spring and fish frolic and lambs gambol.

So Paul prays that Christ may dwell in the very center of you through faith.

We know Him as we have faith. Faith which is a gift from God is also our response – we trust, we believe, we obey and Christ dwells in our hearts. It's a relationship, it's a walk. We do not know the whole way. We are way off balance trusting in Him to catch us. We know Him as we spend time trusting Him. We learn how faithful He is to us. We learn how loving He is, how merciful as He answers some requests and denies others, all for the sake of

building up the one thing that counts – our life in Him. Has it ever occurred to you that when God says “No” or allows part of our life to remain difficult that He might be protecting our relationship with Him?

Let’s say you earnestly desire wealth and you not only work hard but pray for it. But He doesn’t grant it. Why? So that it doesn’t become an idol. So that He remains your focus.

Just two months ago I asked, “Lord what is the plan for this parish?” He replied, “The plan is written down, but I’m not telling it to you all at once. You must walk into it. It requires conversation.”

So I ask not “Where’s the next 10 steps?” but “Where’s the next one.” And we take it. And have to ask again as we come to know Him, as we walk by faith.

### **3. That you being rooted and grounded in love**

Here Paul is addressing the new man, that inner man, the new life “you,” rooted and grounded in love “may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge.” (Ephesians 3:18-19a)

WOW. The intensity is turned up.

First it was “that you be strengthened in your inner man.” Then that “Christ would dwell in your hearts.” And now this waterfall of a prayer overwhelming language itself: “that you may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge.”

You start with love, you end with love. You’re grounded in love, you are ready to go up into love. The love of Christ is the base; the love of Christ is the goal. This love that surpasses knowledge that you would know it!

That you would understand the height of the love Christ has for you.

That you would know the depth of the Father’s love for you.

That you would realize He’s loved you all along.

That you would know how broad His love is for all the world!

John sounds a similar note: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” (John 3:16)

How can we know something so great?

How can you measure the measureless?

There are, it's been said, two ways of knowing:

One -- analytical, measuring, dissecting, evaluating

The other – intuitive, knowing by union with.

One circles around and knows from the outside. Scientists know like this. My 12 year old son bought a TV set for \$1 to find out how it works. He took it home, unscrewed all the screws and then hit it with a hammer. This is the masculine way of knowing. But we can't know God this way. He can't be broken up into bits and examined. No, we can only know Him as we are one with Him. Mothers know this way. They know by union with the known.

Christ can dwell in your heart – not just a fingernail or a little toe, but Christ himself. He made your heart as a home for himself; He can dwell in it as you apprehend Him in faith.

Don't be surprised that He can fit in such a small space. The tiny atom contains all the energy needed to fire up a star.

Soul to Soul, Spirit to Spirit, you can know God. Spirit to Spirit you can be filled with His love – the length, the breadth, the height, the depth of this Glorious love!

This is Christianity: knowing God and His love.

Some of you have been coming to church for years. You show up, sing, put some money in the plate, pray with us, take communion and then go home and try to lead a good life. And you think this is what Christianity is! It is not this. All these things are aids to the Christian life. The heart of Christianity is God in us! The new life of Christ in us!

4. That you would be filled with all the fulness of God

Not that you'd have some kind of religious experience

Not that you'd leave with a spiritual feeling

In Scripture we see Herod full of wrath, Peter full of fear, Eve full of covetousness. There can be something inside you that changes your character and makes you do one thing or another whether good or bad. We are vessels always bearing something.

Paul prays that the Ephesian Christians would be filled with God way up to the tippy top of their beings. And not only that they would be filled, but filled with all the fulness of God. This is an amazing concept.

How could God who is so good and so mighty and so perfect and so holy and so loving and so pure? – How could this very, very, very large God, so large that none can comprehend Him, how could all the fulness of God fill me?

Isn't that like asking all the ocean to fill a teacup, all the atmosphere to fill a balloon, all the light of the stars to fill a candle?

We're filled only as He humbles himself to come inside us. Oh, I wish for all of you to know God in this way. Some of you are good citizens in the realm of God, but you remain distant subjects. I want and I believe God so much wants you to know Him and to be filled with His Holy Spirit.

Oh taste and see that the Lord is good!  
His desire is to live in you!  
This is Christianity: Christ in you.  
The fulness of God in you!

Paul prays that they'll be excited. He's excited. This passage, this prayer, is breathless, enthusiastic, energetic: I bow my knees; I pray the Father  
that you would be strengthened  
that Christ would dwell in your hearts  
that you would comprehend the love of Christ  
that you would be filled with God

That's the simplest form of the prayer.

And in some of the individual requests he adds something:

not just that "you would be strengthened" but "strengthened with might through His Spirit."

not just "comprehend and know the love of Christ," but have power to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth"

and "filled with God" becomes "filled with all the fulness of God."

Paul adds so much more: that all these things would be done "according to the riches of God's glory;" that is that it would be done in no small measure but that it would be huge, intense, beautiful, complete as only God in His riches can do.

Paul is excited about the goodness and love of God, and he's praying mightily that the Ephesians would see:

that goodness and love  
that God who is who He is would be the most powerful force in their lives,  
that God in Christ would become everything to them.

Is this scary? Is it off putting? A trace fanatical?

Well you say, “I sure like the idea that God loves me, but let’s not get carried away. After all, religion has its place – it’ll keep me honest in the workplace, faithful at home, and most every Sunday, I’ll be here in church.”

Did you know that God is not after stuffed, starched, timid, unmoved and unmoving people? He doesn’t want a people only interested in fire insurance with just enough contact with Him to receive a “policy” to protect them.

He wants saints abandoned to His love.

He wants women and men so on fire for Him that they’ll do anything.

He wants soldiers for an adventurous campaign.

He wants children to look up to Him and say “Daddy, I love you, I trust you. What next Daddy?”

Where we err is in not knowing the goodness and love of God in all its grand dimensions. We are timid. Like Bilbo Baggins with Gandalf, “ We don’t want any adventures here, thank you.”

One of the supposed hallmarks of modern man is that we will follow the truth wherever it leads. This is the mantra of atheism, scientism and materialism. If they only knew!

God is the truth. He is leading us to rise up and be men and women for Him.

The kingdom of God is real! Grandeur, Magnificence, Power, Splendor, Honor.

Christianity is not one religion among many.

It is the passionate embrace of the truth!

It is the discovery and celebration of what is real!

What is more real than God? What, more lasting and true?

Paul is praying that the Ephesian Christians understand the truth about God. I pray the same for the Livonian Christians. Please pray with me: Lord, we pray that according to the riches of your mercy, you would strengthen these dear ones in their inner man....