

More Than We Can Imagine

Ephesians 3:14-21

What a thrilling, exhausting, joy-filled week we've had.

We continue our series on Paul's letter to the Ephesians titled 'Growing Together.' Why Ephesians? I'll put the quote we've been reading into my own words: Ephesians gives us a peek at the way God's Spirit takes lives like ours and turns them into his church. That sums it up pretty well.

So I've been telling the story of those 33 miners stuck in a hole in Chile, but now I can't do that anymore. Someone was poking fun at me this week, saying that the whole structure of this series is obsolete now that the miners have been rescued. Maybe. But that doesn't mean I can't keep using the story.

The images we saw late Tuesday night and all day Wednesday into early Thursday morning—I caught myself laughing and crying and wondering how it all went so well. As we watched those men come out of that capsule, so many of them prayed and thanked God for making it back to the surface. And I know, everyone would say that if they'd been through the same ordeal. But did you notice that most of these guys talked about their prayers—talked about their relationships to Jesus Christ as if they'd known him before they went in the hole.

That's important, because otherwise it would be too easy to discount the faith of the miners as foxhole faith. You know the saying: "There are no atheists in foxholes." Well the miners we watched on our TV screens this week were buried a lot deeper than any foxhole, and their faith was deeper, too.

We're studying Paul's letter to the Ephesians because it's designed to help churches grow—to help them grow in depth of faith and in service to each other and the world. We're talking about growing together, and this journey through Ephesians is one of the ways we can do that.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Last week Stephanie talked about the first half of this chapter. Paul starts in the first verse sounding like he's about to pray, then he interrupts himself with a description of how God has spoken through him and worked through him to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. In our passage this morning Paul picks up the prayer right where he left off.

And how does Paul, leading apostle of the early church, writer of most of the letters in the New Testament, rabbi of rabbis, Pharisee of Pharisee—how does big time Paul start his description of how he prays for the Ephesians?

On his knees.

Paul kneels and begins to pray one of the richest, most generous prayers in the entire Bible.

He prays for God to strengthen his church. That's a good reminder for us: this is God's church, not ours; God is our source of power.

He prays that Christ will live in and through the people of the church. Churches can easily slide into functioning as just another kind of human organization, like a school or charity or social club. The point here is that Christ—and all that that name means for us—Christ is who we follow, and it's in Christ's name that we serve.

He prays that the Ephesians will begin to grasp how much Christ loves them. This can be an incredibly difficult thing to swallow. After working in different kinds of ministries for 25 years or so, one of the hardest things I've seen people wrestle with is truly believing that God loves them no matter what, warts and all.

He prays that they'll never forget that Christ's love is the most important thing they'll ever know. Now that one is a challenge, too. This is a pretty well-educated and successful crowd. I look out there and I can see some Harvards and Princetons and Penns—I can see folks who studied at great public universities, and people with advanced degrees in all kinds of subjects from business to science to the humanities.

No matter what you may think you know, Paul says here, it's dwarfed by this one single thing—this one crucial data point: Jesus loves you. Jesus the Messiah, loves you.

Karl Barth was one of the giants in the world of theology in the 20th century. Late in his career he was giving a lecture and one of the students there asked him to describe his most important conclusion from a lifetime of studying the Scriptures. He paused for a moment, then sang the song: 'Jesus Loves Me, This I Know.'

Allowing ourselves to be embraced fully by the love of Jesus is the most important thing any of us will ever know.

In the end Paul prays that the Ephesians—that the church—will be filled to the very top with the fullness of God. That everything we do or say or give or create will somehow reflect the

God who made us and redeems us and loves us in spite of what we might do—who loves us often times in spite of who we've become.

This is an extravagant prayer—it's a prayer that's meant to show us and remind us of how mind-blowingly generous God has been to us—how generous he wants to be to his church.

Eugene Peterson tells the story of an American family that adopted a Haitian girl who had been orphaned in an accident. They brought her to their home—there were already two teenage boys in the family—they brought her home and when they sat down to their first dinner together, the parents noticed something crucial. As the boys tore through their meals and devoured seconds and thirds of everything on the table, the little girl looked sad and worried.

The mother guessed correctly that the new addition to the family thought that this might be all the food there was, and so she took her by the hand and led her around the kitchen. She opened the fridge to show her that there would be plenty of food for the next day. She opened the bread drawer to show that there were more loaves. She showed her the pantry where there were mounds of food for the coming days and weeks.

What the mom did was show her little girl the abundance of what was available to her—that she would never be hungry again, even if she did have to share meals with her growing brothers.

When God adopts us into his family through Jesus Christ, and when the Holy Spirit steps in to shape us into his church—as all of that happens, Paul takes us by the hand in this prayer—he takes us around to show us how much great stuff is there for us to enjoy. He shows us the abundance of God's grace and provision, of love and mercy for us. "I pray that you would be able to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ."

But we know that prayer can be a challenge for us sometimes. The day after the miners came out of that hole in Chile, Mark Galli, the editor of *Christianity Today*, wrote a challenging article on prayer that got right to the heart of what bothers us most about bringing our concerns before God. Mark's problem is what to make of all the times we pray for things—for healing, for peace, for good to win over evil once in a while—we pray for things that don't go the way we ask. What does that mean for us as we pray?

"First, we are to ask God for things that are important to us, no matter how we feel about God or prayer or the thing being prayed for. Second, once we announce our desire to God, it's his job to deal with it. Prayer is not manipulating heaven to fulfill our desires. It's putting what we desire into the hands of a loving God and letting him fulfill it in his time, in his way."

Our passage today ends with a benediction. This one might be familiar to many of you—in the church where I grew up this was the benediction almost every Sunday.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

It's a challenge to us to open our eyes and see that to aim too low is to miss what God has in store for us—what God is prepared to give us—what God wants to do in us and through us.

C.S. Lewis wrote about this tendency that people have of underestimating what God has to share with us. He writes:

“Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

It's this benediction that informs our giving and pledging as we move into our season of talking about stewardship. It's the benediction that reminds us that our participation is not about fueling God's work in this church and in the world. Our giving is our way of joining into the work that God is already doing—the places where God's spirit is already active. As generous as this congregation can be, if it all depended on our giving we'd be in serious trouble.

But that's not how the story goes. What we do here is part of God's work that is more than we could ever imagine. We join in as a privilege, not a chore—as a gift and not just another bill to pay. As we continue to talk about how Paul's letter to the Ephesians helps us grow together, and as we add to that our own conversation about the ministry of this church, keep this last verse in your mind:

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!

Amen.