

This month we have been exploring the opening chapters of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Let’s do a brief review as we are at the half-way point of this sermon series on “Ephesus Living at St. Paul.” Paul was not one of the twelve disciples but was called to faith and missionary work by the Christ, resurrected. Paul journeyed from Israel through the regions we now call Turkey, Greece and Italy three times. For a brief time at the end of Paul’s second missionary journey, and then for more than two years on his third missionary journey, Paul spend time at the church at Ephesus. An overview of his time in Ephesus can be found in the book of Acts, chapters 18 and 19. During his time in Ephesus, a city that housed the famous temple to the Greek goddess Artemis, Paul saw many converted to faith in Jesus Christ and many others who opposed his message. One prominent silversmith, Demetrius, who made implements for the worship of Artemis, found his business suffering greatly because people were converting to Christianity. The ensuing near-riot led Paul to leave the city, but only after the apostle had done much to stabilize and grow the Christian community there.

Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians sometime in years 60–61. It was during this time that Paul sat in prison in Rome (Ephesians 3:1; 4:1), making Ephesians one of the four letters commonly known as the Prison Epistles. The others are Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Paul divided his letter to the Ephesians into two clear segments. Paul spent the first three chapters of the letter discussing how God’s mysterious will can be known to people through the life, teaching, actions, death and resurrection of Jesus (1:9). Paul declares that through faith in Christ people can have the power of God work through them, the same power that worked in and through Jesus (1:19). Paul notes that new life in Christ is a gift from God (2:8) and not something that needs to be earned in any fashion us. Yet it is a gift with a purpose. With the grace, love and power of Christ in us Paul proclaims we are properly equipped to do good works (2:10). Now, doesn’t that define what we do here at St. Paul, let the love of Christ flow through us and enable us to do good works. (Habitat plug, Benson Paint-a-thon) Another aspect of good works is living in unity with others and Paul shares that spirit of Jesus break down barriers between people (2:10). As is true in all letters written by Paul we find here in his letter to the Ephesians that Paul notes that all he shares was revealed to him in visions from above (3:1-6). Although Paul considers himself least among the apostles he feels he has been called to share the good news and is delighted with the response of those who have formed the church in Ephesus.

Our lesson this weekend concludes the 3rd chapter of the letter. Remember, chapters 1-3 are the “theological” section of the letter, that is, belief statements. After laying out the theological truths in these three chapters Paul then makes his purpose clear: he expected that this community of faith will walk in accordance with its heavenly calling (Ephesians 4:1). The details of our walk with Christ we will review in chapter 4 & 5 in August. Let’s turn the final verses of the 3rd chapter today which is our lesson for today.

Ephesians 3:14-21 New International Version

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to *grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ*, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. ²⁰ 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, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.

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I met Jacob at the visitation for Estelle Thursday evening. Jacob is a young adult and he was at the visitation for his great-grandmother who had passed away a few days earlier. There were dozens of people, maybe 100, inside the chapel at Forest Lawn where Estelle's body lay. Yet when I arrived Jacob was one of a few out in the lobby. He was near the table where the sign-in booklet was located. So I introduced myself to him and asked if he was related to Estelle. He told me "Yes, I am Jacob, one of her great grand children." When he told me his name I clearly understood the tears in his eyes and upon his cheeks.

The day before Judy and Jan, Estelle's daughters, had told me of the immense love that she had for her grand children and great grand children. To illustrate this they told me the story of Jacob, when he was born. He was born pre-mature and spend weeks in the pre-me unit at the hospital. Each and every day that Jacob was in the pre-me unit Estelle sat by him, talked to him, read to him, prayed over him. She kept vigil until Mom and Dad got off of work and were able to be present. Great-grandma infused Jacob with love hour after hour, day after day, and week after week until he was strong enough and big enough to go home. Being born premature comes with its risks. Yet, Jacob was infused with the power of God's loving spirit in his inner-being as Grandma Estelle and so many others showers heaven with prayers on his behalf. The tears I saw in Jacob's eyes recognized the gift his Great-grandma gave him to start off his life.

¹⁸ grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ...

Our youth group did a good job the first day of the mission trip in Chicago. We had navigated our way on the train up to Evanston to visit St. Paul's own Amber Naylor at Lake Street Church and then do volunteer work in their homeless shelter sorting clothes in their clothes closet. We had lunch, jump on the red-line train south to Roosevelt Road, caught a bus west to Canal Street, and walked the final few blocks to the Pacific Garden Mission. After signing in at the front desk we were escorted to the dining hall where we were going to have the opportunity to set-up, serve and clean-up for dinner that evening and the next. But I did not anticipate the size of the dinner hall. It was wide enough from side to side and deep enough from front to back to allow tables and chairs so 500 people could be served at one seating. It boggled the mind to grasp the height and the depth of the love of Christ within the hearts of people to serve that many meals each and every day.

²⁰ ...do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine...

It was nice to get back from Chicago, the eight of us, Saturday evening. We shared in worship upon our return Saturday and then Sunday morning. But then I looked at the calendar and the upcoming Wednesday and Thursday has us scheduled to help with the Hispanic children's ministry at Grace UMC in south Omaha. Who is going to be there to help I wondered to myself. We just exhausted the Senior High youth. Yet Pastor's Marta's outreach and the response was immeasurably more that I could have asked for or imagined. The confirmation class of Jackson, Abigail, Katherine, Jude, Stephen along with Sebastian who is bi-lingual was in the parking lot, ready to go Wednesday morning. Not only were they present but Ella and Ben as well as mothers, with food for lunch, Amy, Deb and Stephanie were ready to go. Then to top it off, Jenny from child-care asked if her two teenage sons could help out and they are bi-lingual as well. The number of volunteers was immeasurably more than I could have ever imagined. Each hand was helpful on Wednesday and all hands and eyes were irreplaceable when we spent the day at the zoo on Thursday. Tracking 20 children between 5 and 10 years old is quite a task.

These are a few examples of Ephesus Living at St. Paul. I could talk about the same dynamic with St. Paul's presence in parade and pie both this weekend in the midst of Benson Days activities. I am looking forward to God's provision this coming Saturday for our Habitat for Humanity build and then on August 18th for our Paint-a-thon in Benson. Ephesus Living at St. Paul is all about God's love working in powerful ways through who we are and what we do.

With God's presence in Ephesus years and ago and the sacred presence continuing in our midst it is appropriate to conclude this message with the final verse of our lesson today, 3:21,

...“to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.”