

A Sermon for DaySpring

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Love Surpassing Knowledge

Ephesians 3:14-21

July 28, 2024

The refrain today, the songs we've sung, the scriptures we've heard, the prayers we've voiced, have had one dominant theme: the love of God in Christ. Is there anything more central to the gospel than the announcement that God loves us? St. Paul wrote half the New Testament to help the early churches in the Roman Empire catch the significance of Christ's coming. Why did Jesus come? What was going on that made Jesus die? Who was Jesus? What does Jesus—a man who lived a generation ago in a distant land—have to do with my life today here in western Turkey in the middle of the first century?

The letters Paul wrote for one city or congregation were often circulated because they knew what he was writing to them was important. It's why we have them today. The letters give us the fruit of Paul's verdant mind, but they also shed some light on his ministry.

The letter addressed to "the saints who are in Ephesus" is a work that really showcases both Paul's theological mind and Paul's ministry. Remember, Paul was not just a heady theologian, finding ways to articulate atonement theories and trying to apply reason to the historical reality of Jesus. Paul was a pastor, a minister, an apostle. He's writing to real people about real life.

As with most of his letters, Ephesians is structured in a particular way. The first three chapters of Ephesians is largely made up of the most profound of Paul's theological teaching: God raised Jesus from the dead, he tells the Ephesians. We were likewise dead until God raised us with Christ, but we are now saved because of Christ's death, not because of anything we merited on our own. Christ reconciled us to one another and to God through his cross, tearing down the barrier between Jew and Gentile. We have now been fit together into a new kind of household through Christ. Remember, Paul says in these first three chapters, the truth of the gospel. Then in the first verse of chapter 4, Paul encourages the saints who are in Ephesus "to therefore walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." So, in the second half of the letter, he shifts to the way they ought to live their lives in light of the truth of the gospel.

Our passage this morning is the hinge point of the letter. Immediately he makes that shift in chapter 4, into the practical realities of living the life of Christ, Paul offers a prayer. In this prayer, you see the pastor heart of Paul:

“I 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, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love--that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

One sentence, lots of phrases, heartfelt prayer of a pastor. This is the prayer of a parent. This is the prayer of a friend.

“That you would somehow know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge...”
What a beautiful and difficult paradox I pray you would know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

I think Paul is a mystic. All the explaining is vital; all the theologizing is vital. Making sense of who Jesus is and what God has done through Jesus excites our imaginations, gives us a window into the life of God. But Paul is praying for more than just comprehension of the truth, more than just understanding the letter. He’s praying for an encounter, for a revelation of something that transcends anything that he could ever quite articulate: that his hearers would be strengthened in their inner being where Christ dwells, that they would be empowered to know the love of Christ—that love that surpasses knowing, that they would be filled with all the fullness of God.

Paul is a mystic. Christianity is a mystical religion, a spirituality of revelation, of experience, of encounter, of connection. We have very distinct beliefs about who God is, what God has done, and we articulate these marvelous truths. We proclaim what God has done in Christ, not just so we can distinguish ourselves from some other group that has other beliefs, but because what God has done has everything to do with this time and this place, with here and now, with you and me. The point is not just to get the theology understood, but to get it lived. Yes, understand it; but understanding is only the beginning.

And so Paul prays for an encounter of the Holy Spirit, a connection to Christ, a knowledge of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. Oh, my brothers and sisters, that you would know the love of Christ deep in your bones, that it would resonate through you, that you would be filled with all the fullness of God.

Where might an experience of the love of Christ like this come from? Where do we encounter this love that transcends knowing? We read about the inner being...where Christ dwells...and we might picture the saint in his prayer closet, the spiritual giant on her knees, just waiting for the moment of realization to come. I think this is what much contemporary worship music is designed to do: to create an encounter, an experience, a feeling, to use

ambiance and sound, key changes and kick drums to jump-start an emotional encounter with Christ

I don't mean to condemn contemporary worship music: much of it is high quality, even if it's not your style, and I'm sure almost all of it comes from an authentic and genuinely earnest place of wanting to lead people into God's presence, but there's a fine line between jump-starting someone's experience of God and manipulating an emotional experience.

When I say Paul is a mystic, I don't mean that Paul has in mind something ecstatic or euphoric in his prayer. Those kinds of moments—moments of ecstasy or euphoria in worship or prayer or other contemplative practices--can be beautiful and deeply meaningful; I've had some in my life. But not everyone is granted those moments and certainly not every day. And emotions about the love of Christ shouldn't be mistaken for knowing the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that Paul mentions in his prayer.

So where does this mystical knowledge, this encounter of the love of Christ come from? Paul says it is the work of the Holy Spirit through...the church, the community. This kind of knowledge that Paul is praying for is a kind that we receive from, that we give to, that we share with one another.

Every second-person pronoun in this passage is plural. Paul's prayer is not for you as an individual. It's for us--for the community of the church.

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you ALL may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you ALL are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you ALL may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you ALL may be filled with all the fullness of God.

He prays for the "saints who are in Ephesus" (1.1) that they might have the power to comprehend *with all the saints* the love of Christ. This is a knowledge we share. We gather for worship to hear of the love of Christ. We return to this place to be reminded of the love of Christ. We come to the table to encounter the love of Christ...together.

We might experience the love of Christ in our prayer closet, and I pray you do: few practices are more important in my life than daily time spent by myself in prayer with God. But it's funny that Paul rarely talks about those kinds of practices. Paul always seemingly has the community in mind when he is writing. I think Paul envisions the Spirit strengthening us in our inner being by comprehending together with all the saints—with one another—the love of Christ.

I can know the love of Christ by direct revelation, though that is rare...and I can know the love of Christ by having a sandwich at the picnic table with Karl Franklin or by going on a pilgrimage with Kathy Johnson or by cutting down tree limbs with Randy Cox or by singing in choir with Wes Cunningham and Joanne Beaty or by sitting next to Les Neugebauer at a Good Friday service or by swimming with Austin and Elizabeth Brown and their kids or by visiting Betty Burleson in her home or by having a meal with Bruce Longenecker because I need to try to make some sense of Ephesians 3. And the examples just pile on top of each other.

When we share during our formation hour or on Wednesday evening for prayers or go on retreat together, when we gather for an all-church breakfast or for a lectionary breakfast, when we meet in each other's homes or at the Naomi house, when we worship together and work together and eat together and pray together and play together and share lives together, the love of Christ becomes real, and we stop and realize that through our connection with the Body of Christ (a very important image for Paul, freighted with meaning), through our connection with the Body of Christ in the fellowship of friendship, we have a knowledge of something that really transcends knowing.

The connection to eating is natural here. We can know what the love of Christ is the way we know a recipe, but Paul doesn't want us just to read the recipe; he wants the meal for us. The love of Christ is not about the cookbook, though the cookbook is vital. To know the love of Christ the way Paul prays for us is not to read the cookbook but to feast at the table with one another. And when we eat, we find the abundant riches of the feast. The same sort of abundance that we hear about in 2 Kings when 20 loaves of barley feed 100 people with lots left over. The same sort of abundance that we hear about in John 6 when 5 loaves of barley and 2 fish feed 5,000 people with food left over.

And most centrally and clearly, we see...experience...know the love of Christ present at the communion table, where Christ is our host, where we see the body and blood of Christ, the image of his love. But we do not merely see the body and blood of Christ, we eat it, we take it in and make it part of our own body, participating in some mystical way in Christ's death. And we do all that together, with all the saints gathered, and somehow...in that moment... we know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

My brothers and sisters, we prepare to eat this modest, perfect meal together, the signs of our salvation laid before us. Let me say it plainly: Jesus loves you. You are a beloved child of God. For those who have received the baptism of Christ, you have also received the word that Christ received at his baptism: "You are my beloved child, in whom I am well-pleased." The Creator of the universe knows you in all your brokenness, all your weakness, all your striving and stressing...and the Creator of the universe loves you. You are invited to receive

what no one is worthy to receive and yet what is freely given: the unmerited gift of the love of God in Christ Jesus.

How? How is this gift ours? How can we possibly live into this calling as beloved children of God?

This is how Paul ends his prayer: with doxology.

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

Let us prepare to come to the table.

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