

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo  
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Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom every 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 Lord's holy people, 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.

**Big Prayer**

My sermon title today is indebted to our three-year-old grandson Dean. Dean hails from Pittsburgh, a place known for rivers, not oceans. I believe I have shared this once before, but when we took Dean and his big sister Eve to Plymouth beach when Dean was only two, he got out of the car, walked on to the beach, looked up and said, in a voice full of hushed awe: BIG WATER!

The connection here may not be immediately apparent, but this week I got to thinking about Paul's prayer as a very Big Prayer. By this I do not mean that the prayer Paul writes and prays is for the whole world. It does not mention the threat of North Korea, ISIS, or global warming. It doesn't mention the ongoing disparity of income between people around the globe and in our own nation. It lifts up none of the obvious things that plague people in the world out there. But it is nevertheless a BIG prayer. It's scope and aim is large, for it speaks of the love of God and it aims for the human heart.

This week, after the Texas church killings, I struggled with what to preach this morning. Clergy colleagues all over the place were posting on Facebook about "thoughts and prayers" not being enough, that it was time, beyond time, to urge the church to exercise its moral muscle, and be more active in pleading with government for some kind of reasonable gun control. As someone said at bible study this week: why does any nonmilitary person need an assault rifle? Though it's stewardship season, should I research gun violence statistics, and preach about gun control instead?

We clergy talk about letting the Spirit lead us, but when it comes to preaching it can take a while to figure out what this actually means.

Sometime this week my husband and I got into an interesting conversation about the different ways we've been shaped by the religious backgrounds we come from. And they are *very* different backgrounds. I was raised in the United Church of Christ right here in Massachusetts. Mike was raised in the Christian Missionary Alliance Church (a far more evangelical church) in several New England locations. Where progressive liberal churches say faith is mostly about following Jesus, working for peace and justice, helping to bring about the kingdom here on earth, ("Jesus has no hands but yours no feet but yours") evangelical religion says faith is about you and your relationship with Jesus Christ., that that place, the heart place is the locus of true transformation.

I raise this difference, this tension, this morning because I think it exists in our congregation-- as it does in every congregation. There are people for whom faith is primarily about how faith is put into action, into making a difference in the world. There are people for whom faith is primarily about being filled with the fullness of God -- about as Paul says, God's love getting in and changing the "inner man" or inner woman. It isn't of course just one, or just the other. But it may be helpful to lift up that the church is made up of people who come from different backgrounds, and who therefore, at times, hunger for different things.

If you take a moment to look at the colorful image on the bulletin cover today you may see how it reflects our scripture lesson today. You can see the representative human reaching out for the light. There is an anchor being dropped nearby. She stands on a heart, a big red heart. There's a lot of symbolism here, and when I look at this, I see here each one of us. No matter what our spiritual type, our growing up religious background or lack thereof, we are all of us searching for the light, looking for an anchor to hold us, and seeking love as a place from which to stand.

And this is particularly so now. As our culture seems more troubled and angry, less patient and compassionate, certainly less self-reflective this image offers me hope. The person in this image isn't turned in on herself. She isn't listening to herself rant about what is wrong in her life, or blaming others for what's wrong in the world. She is searching for the light, looking for an anchor, All the while standing with her feet rooted in love.

So listen again to Paul's prayer, this time from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*. Again, notice that the prayer doesn't criticize the world or the people in it. It is a prayer, a prayer for followers of Jesus -- which means, dear friends, it is a prayer for *us*.

*My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the*

*heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.*

*God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! God does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, God's Spirit deeply and gently at work within us.*

When I read this out to the bible study this week, everyone immediately started smiling. It was like good news raining down upon us, watering the dry and parched places. “Now you are talking” people said. “That’s so *encouraging*” people said.

So Paul’s prayer isn’t a big prayer because it offers a fix for the world out there, but because it invokes a presence in here. When God dwells in us, God works in us and changes us. As Paul reminds us, God makes remarkable things happen, things we could not have expected, or predicted.

Which leads me to another big prayer, which is in fact my big prayer for this church. And it is this: that we would take Paul’s prayer for the church to heart and let ourselves be filled with gratitude. Gratitude for what God has done and is continuing to do, both in our individual lives and in our shared life together.

So let me ask you a few questions. Have you ever had the experience of someone seeking you out, asking you how you are doing and telling you they are praying for you? Has it ever made tears spring to your eyes? Have you found yourself on more than one occasion coming to church kind of caved in upon yourself, only to leave worship feeling your spirit reaching up and out, feeling yourself suddenly more alive and hopeful? Are you grateful to see our church growing, opening our doors wider, receiving new members, rejoicing in increased energy? Is it important to you that our church seeks to be a place where people of different opinions listen to each other, practicing respectful dialogue, a precious commodity in these fractious days?

What are you truly thankful for about our church today?

Look at our worship today, at the many ways we are being church. We’ve celebrated our Harvest Fair and the way we’ve pulled together to make it happen. We’ve welcomed new members. We’ve passed along robes from our church to a church in Africa. We’ve shared celebrations and concerns, raised prayers reflecting what is going on in people’s lives and in our world. We’ll be taking up the Good Samaritan offering, assisting people with basic needs like food, rent, and utilities and also, as we do every Sunday, offering our gifts in support of the ministry of this church. And today we are saying goodbye to Julie and Andrew and Harrison, who have been such a deep blessing to us in the time we’ve had together, praying God’s blessing on them as they journey westward. We’re standing in God’s love, showing God’s love, sharing God’s love. It’s just one Sunday, yet so many ways of being the church.

As your pastor, I am grateful for such vitality. But I also have particular and personal gratitude to share.

To be honest here, this fall has had me sort of breathless. The church is busier than ever, and people seem to be going through so many different kinds of struggles which need an extra measure of support. I am very grateful for Reverend Rosemary MacKay and her hours each week in visitation -- helping to cover the bases during this oh so full time.

I'm also grateful for you, for the kind of congregation you are. You know, not every church knows how to care for their pastor the way you do. Every week it seems one of you asks me how my father is. If I sometimes stumble a bit in my responses, it's because it isn't always easy for me to visit my father in his assisted living facility. He is such a shadow of his former self, and it makes me sad. But because you ask me, I search for an honest answer, and it makes me realize a few things: My father and I are still having moments, you know, meaningful, tender moments, full of love and affection. I realize too I am not facing my father's Alzheimers decline, or this life of being a caregiver completely on my own. There are -- thanks be to God -- companions on the way. Oh there's a third thing too. I suspect some of you are praying for me. I feel it. I have felt buoyed up by it. And I am grateful.

Next week, on Thanksgiving Sunday, we will come forward with our pledges. My big prayer for the church on this day is simple: That your giving will reflect your gratitude -- for all that God is in your life and in our midst, for all that God makes possible.

As I say this, I realize that there are some of you with circumstances—job loss, health concerns, other circumstances -- that may mean you are worried about making a pledge, or know you cannot increase your giving this year. This is where our being the body of Christ together comes in. It's like the Boston Celtics. They lost one of their best players, Gordon Heyward, in the early minutes of the very first game in a horrific leg injury. They've had a couple of other key players be injured as well. But for eleven straight games now, eleven straight wins, this team has pulled together no matter what -- each one doing their part and it has been so fun and inspiring to watch!

I hope our church can be a team like this. If our life circumstances will permit it, then, then we can give more freely, more extravagantly, remembering that there are among us church members who cannot do that. But if you are one of those who feels more anxious, do not judge yourself unable to give at all. Put your widows mite in the box, remembering Jesus words about that and also God, who is in us and through us able to do far more than we can think or imagine. Giving something is a way of driving off fear, staying open to God, and not letting pinched circumstances pinch your spirit.

My big prayer is simply that when it comes to giving we would all of us do what we can, ever mindful of God's gifts to us.

At a church I once served, we said the same prayer every offering time. The leader would say words about God being good, about God's mercy being everlasting.

The people would then say:

Thanks be to God, whose love creates us.

Thanks be to God, whose mercy redeems us.

Thanks be to God, whose grace leads us into the future.

And now, as Paul ended his prayer so too shall I end my prayer for us:

*Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*