

Becoming God's People

Ephesians 3:14-21

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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Sally asked the questions: Have you ever been prayed for? Have you ever felt the power behind those prayers?

Prayer is a mysterious thing. It is something we do even though we can't explain it. It is something we believe in even when we are not sure it works. It is something that we sometimes doubt and sometimes have great faith in.

Even with our mix of confidence and doubt, our certainty and questions, prayer remains a part of our life of faith, a way that we can express our hopes and fears in the presence of the divine.

And, interestingly enough, both our scripture reading from last week and the one we heard today come in the form of prayers. Last week it was Jesus' prayer for the unity of all Christians. Today it is the prayer credited to Paul, a prayer prayed on behalf of Christians in congregations around Ephesus.

And while it is easy to hear this as simply a personal prayer, prayed from one individual to another, it is also important to note that this is a prayer prayed for communities who knew what it was to struggle with the question of who belonged and how far God's reach was. After all, in Ephesus and the surrounding areas they had to work through questions of how Gentiles and Jews could be in one church together, whether Gentiles had to follow the Jewish law to be Christians, what the connection between this new movement around Jesus and the Jewish faith would be as they moved forward.

So, into this situation come the words of this prayer, a prayer prayed in the name of the God of everything, the God whose reach is not bound to national and tribal identities, but to whom all people belong.

*And hear these words again: I pray that from [God's] glorious, unlimited resources [you will be empowered] with inner strength through [God's] Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep [God's] love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.*

Friends, when we let those words sink in, they are powerful. In fact, they can be overwhelming, overwhelming both because of what they claim about God and also because of what they ask of us.

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Just think of what our lives, what this world would look like, if we lived in the strength of God's power. Power expressed and known not in force and might and demands, but the power of God's love.

Just think of who we would become if we really opened our hearts wide enough for Jesus to make a home there, to direct our living. Remember in the opening chapter of John's gospel we hear that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, or as Eugene Peterson says it in *The Message*, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14). So, what would it mean for us to live from the presence of Jesus, to live in the same manner as Jesus?

Just think of how we would live if we truly believed in the extravagance of God's love and allowed ourselves to be shaped by it. How would we interact with others if we really paid attention to how high and wide and abundant God's love is, not just for us, but for all humanity?

Unity. Love. Grace. These are concepts we believe in...although they are easier to believe in here, during worship.

They are things we aspire to live and embrace.

Meanwhile, they are difficult. They are difficult for us as individuals and as communities. They are difficult when they challenge our priorities or push us out of our comfort zones. They are difficult when we have chosen to love so many other things more than we really love God.

Here we are on July 4th, our nation's independence day. So, what does it mean to live with one foot in this world, as citizens of this nation, while also recognizing that God is not bound to national borders? What does it mean to be raised on stories of rugged individualism and "pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps" while we worship a God of relationship and community, while we follow Jesus whose first priority was never himself and who never existed apart from his communal identity? What does it mean to claim the love of God for ourselves while we deny the harm we have done to others?

Friends, the reality is that being faithful followers of Jesus, being people who are rooted, truly and deeply, in God's love - none of this is easy. It challenges us to be honest. It challenges us to be better. It challenges us to be community, not just when it comes naturally, but to be community beyond where boundaries and borders separate.

This is not easy, and yet it is the prayer that has been prayed for us from the beginning, and the prayer that I hope we continue to pray for one another as individuals and as a community.

May we live from the power of God's strength. May we be rooted so deeply in God's love that it oozes from our very being and into all our interactions. May we open our

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hearts wide so that Jesus isn't only an occasional visitor, but so that Jesus takes up permanent residence and shapes who we are.

This is not only the prayer we hear in Ephesians. It is my prayer for you, for me, for us...that we may continue to become God's people. Amen.