

# Synod Sunday May 1, 2005 Ephesians 1:15-23

*Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke*

## **An Ascension Prayer for our Fellow Believers**

1. A Prayer of Thankfulness
2. A Prayer for Enlightenment
3. A Prayer of Confidence

*NIV **Ephesians 1:15** For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints,<sup>16</sup> I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.<sup>17</sup> I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.<sup>18</sup> I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,<sup>19</sup> and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength,<sup>20</sup> which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,<sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.<sup>22</sup> And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,<sup>23</sup> which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*

Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ, our risen and ascended Lord,

It was 155 years ago this month that the Wisconsin Synod was founded in a place called Granville, Wisconsin. The founders were a handful of German immigrant pastors with names like Muehlhauser, Weinmann and Wrede. Two of those three were bachelors, but their intent with forming the synod was to do more than establish a league for lonely Germans. A key concern of theirs was the difficulty in locating and enlisting faithful Lutheran pastors to serve the many German immigrants coming to Wisconsin. Some of the new congregations had already had to deal with scandalous conduct by men who were serving them as pastors. Others were served by pastors who weren't Lutheran or who, it was later discovered, weren't even pastors. And convincing pastors to come to Wisconsin from Germany wasn't producing the necessary number of pastors either. Finally, the founders of the synod said, "We must have a well in our own country," that is, a source of pastors in our own country.

Here we are 155 years later and locating qualified and faithful pastors is still a concern. It's our concern here at St. Peter right now. But through our synod we have blessings that those early Wisconsin Synod pastors might have found hard to believe. This month, 55 men, well prepared for the ministry are going to

graduate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. And before that, more than 100 teacher and staff ministry graduates of Martin Luther College are going to present themselves for assignment into the ministry. It's clear that we do have a well in our own country—and we've had it for a long time. That's one of the reasons why today, on Synod Sunday, I'd like us to spend a few minutes appreciating the blessings we receive through our synod. And I'd like to do that against the backdrop of nine verses in Ephesians 1. What we have here is the apostle Paul's prayer for his fellow believers, a prayer that's emboldened by his knowledge that Jesus Christ, who died and rose for him, is seated at the right hand of God, receiving those intercessions and acting on them.

### **1. A Prayer of Thankfulness**

Paul writes to the Ephesians here, *"For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers."* Paul was really good at this—at appreciating the blessing of fellow believers, people who shared his faith and joined with him in expressing that faith. In fact, not only does he thank God for fellow believers here in the first chapter of Ephesians, but he does so as well in the opening verses of the next four of his epistles—Philippians, Colossians, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Perhaps it was the fact that he was under house arrest in Rome when he wrote this letter and the next two that caused him to appreciate the company of fellow believers. Whatever it was, we can learn something from him.

I have a sense that appreciation for our fellow Christians, and especially for those who share our confession of faith in this synod, is something that we rarely express. All too easily we can lose sight of the fact that God has given us blessing after blessing through our fellow believers in the Wisconsin Synod. We're about to receive a major blessing here at St. Peter—a new pastor whose college and seminary education was planned, carried out and generously subsidized by our fellow believers in this synod. The same was true last year at this time when Miss Reichley was assigned to our congregation. And a few years before that, when the Heyns came to our congregation, the system that brought them here was set up and maintained by our synod—the same synod saw to it that they were properly educated to serve as teachers. More than this, our congregation owes its very existence to the God's grace through our synod, when a mission congregation was established here in Modesto more than 28 years ago and then nurtured along the path to self-support by more than a dozen years of operating subsidy. Now, through our synod once again, God enables us to share the hope that we have through Jesus' death and resurrection as we participate in mission work in this country and overseas.

What wonderful blessings these are! Just listing them for ourselves will prompt us to say, "Thank you, Lord, for our fellow believers in this synod. Thank you, Lord, for the blessings you've given us through them, and thank you for the blessing of joining with them in carrying the message of your love to the world.

This isn't a perfect church body. There isn't a perfect church body in this sinful world. What's charitably called rugged individualism can very easily become plain old (sinful) stubbornness. Though our synod owes its beginning to the work of traveling missionaries, our own mission zeal has at times left something to be desired. And, of course, materialism and a whole host of other "-isms" have had a negative impact on our synod and its people and its mission. That's why Paul's prayer for enlightenment for his fellow believers is as fitting now as it was back then.

## **2. A Prayer for Enlightenment**

Paul tells the Ephesians that he "keep(s) asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also," he says, "that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe." What Paul is praying for here is a trio of blessings from the Trinity. Did you notice how he mentioned all three persons of the Triune God, God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit? And in a vivid, Spirit-inspired mixture of metaphors, he prays that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened so that we'll clearly see the blessings God has for us who believe. There are three blessings that Paul especially wants to draw to our attention. First is hope, the confident expectation of a future in heaven. The second is to realize how rich we are to share in the glorious inheritance of the saints in heaven. And the third is the incomparably great power that God puts at the disposal of those who believe in Jesus. Would it even be possible to spend a day sulking or sad if the eyes of our hearts were brilliantly enlightened by the recognition of this hope, these riches, and this power? And if you have a love and appreciation for your fellow believers, isn't this exactly what you want for them—the hope, the riches and the incomparable power that we have in Jesus?

I'm just back from two days of meetings in Milwaukee about some of the problems our synod is facing. After a period of unprecedented mission expansion in the 1990s, we are now recalling some of the missionaries we sent out because we lack the funds to keep them in the field. This isn't always just unmitigated disaster, because in many cases it forces us to turn the work over to the people of the country where the missions are located. But in a world that's dying to know Jesus, we need more missionaries, not fewer. The two high schools, the seminary and especially the college where we educate our future pastors and teachers are all strapped for funds and have been on a three-year program of reducing expenses and increasing tuition. Just a few weeks ago the organ teacher who was instructing my daughter, Jessica, was told that the school couldn't afford to keep him on staff anymore.

The sad thing, as far as I'm concerned, is that I believe that if our eyes were really open to the blessings we have in our synod, I don't think that these struggles would have to exist. When I consider that the average annual contribution for the work of our synod per communicant member is roughly equivalent to the cost

of a month and a half of basic cable television, it seems unavoidable to conclude that we have a blessing we're not appreciating. But the good thing is that this is a problem that can be solved. As the eyes of our hearts are enlightened, as we come to know Jesus better, come to know better the hope, the riches and the power that we have in him, I'm certain that support for the soul-saving work of our church will grow stronger and stronger.

The amazing thing is that the current financial challenges of our church body have not caused the work of proclaiming the gospel to grind to a halt. Wonderful things are happening. A few months ago we were concerned that there wouldn't be enough calls for the 55 seminary graduates. Now it looks like we may not have enough calls for all the graduates. And among the graduates are three African-American men, The relatively new Pastoral Studies Institute has a Native American, a Hmong immigrant, a man from the Republic of China and still another from Laos ready for service in the pastoral ministry this year. Perhaps it was the knowledge that God's work cannot be hindered by opposition of any kind that caused Paul to pray as he does here with such confidence.

### **3. A Prayer of Confidence**

If the apostle Paul was inclined to be a worrier, then you'd think that the situation of these Ephesian Christians would have given him plenty to worry about. They were a little group in a large city that had proven its hostility to Christianity. In addition to the external opposition, there was the internal opposition to their unity and their perseverance in the faith, opposition that came from the sinful natures of the very members of the congregation. Yet, Paul's words here are not the tightly-wound frettings of an anxious heart. He finds comfort and even boldness in the power of God. He writes, *"That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be the head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."*

Paul reminds us here that the Jesus we worship is no longer a lowly servant who abstains from using his power. The one who humbled himself to redeem us is now risen from the dead and ascended to heaven—exalted in glory. From his place of honor and authority he rules over all things for the good of his body, the church. The power by which God raised Jesus from the dead is the same power with which Jesus reigns now. There is no shortage of power with him, no limitation on his power, no wishing he could do more than he can. He puts that power at our disposal. He has imbued his Word and his sacraments with that power. Jesus' power makes us bold and confident as we live for him and serve him. His power is at work in us and through us.

I have never taken part in a Synod Sunday like this, and I'm not sure why not. Even a brief reflection on the blessings God has given us through our synod

results in a long list of things for which to be thankful. With his ascension prayer for his fellow believers, the apostle Paul has to the kind of things for which we can be praying too. May God open our eyes to the blessings of our fellowship within our Wisconsin Synod, and may he bless us as we walk together and work together to nurture believers and reach the lost with the good news of Jesus. Amen.