

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA

✠ Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost ✠

September 11, 2005

Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

"I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole 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 saints, 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."

(Eph. 3:13-21, NIV)

When something happens that people don't understand, they want answers. Have you noticed that? When huge skyscrapers collapsed after being pierced by airliners, people wanted to find out why it had to happen. When a spacecraft is ripped apart upon re-entering the earth's atmosphere, people wanted to find out why it happened and make sure it wouldn't happen again. When hurricane winds pound coastal towns and cause major destruction to property and lives, people want to know why. They want to come to some conclusion about why these things happen that they can't otherwise explain.

When a widow's son got sick she wanted to know why. She thought maybe it was her sin that caused it. When Elijah raised her son from the dead she came to a conclusion about this great act of power.

When another widow lost her only son, she certainly must have wondered why. When Jesus raised her son from the dead, she, too, came to a conclusion about this great act of power. Both widows concluded, "This man is a prophet from God." Even the crowd came to this conclusion about Jesus, they said "God has come to help his people." God is using his power to help his people.

I think that when most people think about the great power of God, they think of his power in nature, for example, the power he exercises to keep the stars in their courses and to bring rain and sunshine on the earth. Or they think of his power in terms of what insurance policies call "acts of God"—hurricanes, floods, earthquakes. In any case, they don't tend to think of God's power to help his people.

But we don't have to go to Zarapheth or Nain, or even New Orleans to see the power of God. We don't have to go far at all. We can look right here and see **God's Power to help his people**. We see God's power when **Jesus lives in our hearts through the gospel**. And we see God's power when we see that **Jesus loves us more than we know**.

In this section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Paul is praying for them. He says, "**For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.**" Paul comes to his heavenly Father in prayer very humbly, but his prayer is very bold. It's a big prayer. "**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.**" Paul prays that God would give something to the Ephesians, that God would give them something in keeping with his glorious riches. Imagine asking Bill Gates for something, something that's in keeping with his riches. And so Paul comes to God and asks for something appropriate from the one who created and owns the heavens and the earth—the one who gives riches to the wealthiest of the wealthy. And what could that be? Paul says, "**that he may strengthen you with power.**" And not just any power, mind you, but big power, power that's appropriate for someone who has glorious riches. But... Why did the Ephesians need to be strengthened with great power? Paul says, "**so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.**"

Was Paul going a little overboard? Was he asking for too much? Did the Ephesians really need a great show of power from God just so that Jesus might live in their hearts? After all, weren't they already Christians?

Maybe it would be wise to back up a little bit and think for a moment about this place called the human heart, and see whether this place is a place for Christ to live. Oh, certainly Jesus wants to live in human hearts. After all, he created them; he created them so that they might be his dwelling place and we would live together in perfect unity. But not long after creation, someone else moved into the heart of mankind. Doubt first entered Eve's heart, then greed. Before long, deceit moved in; jealousy soon followed with his companion hate and murder. Pretty soon, sin and wickedness had total control of human hearts. There was no room for Christ to live. It was a household headed for hell, and they've passed the place on from generation to generation.

So perhaps Paul is asking that God would come with his mighty power and wipe out his adversaries and force his way into the hearts of the Ephesians. No, he says: "**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.**" Yes, Paul does pray for God's power, but he prays that God would use his power through his Spirit. God works his great power through the Holy Spirit, who works through Word and Sacraments. In the means of grace God pours out all of his power in heaven and on earth to demonstrate to us again and again his great love for us. He shows us how God sent his one and only Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. In his body and blood he reminds us that he gave his body and shed his blood to forgive our sins. In the water of baptism he demonstrates that he washes our hearts, making them clean and new, making us a new person *in our inner being* and gives us the gift of *faith*, where we receive these wondrous blessings and so Christ lives in our hearts by faith through the gospel.

Today is the beginning of new Sunday School sessions and Bible class sessions. And I pray today that God would strengthen you (each one of you) with power—great power. I pray that Christ would live in your hearts by faith, through his Spirit. That is, that the Holy Spirit will work in your heart as you hear his Word and speak his Word and sing his Word in worship. I pray that the Holy Spirit will strengthen you even more as you take the opportunity to sit at Jesus' feet in regular Bible study, both in the home and among your fellow believers. There God will use his great power to help his people; Christ will come to live in your hearts.

Believe it or not, this is really only half of Paul's prayer. He goes on, and asks the Father for even more power for the Ephesians. **"And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, 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."** This prayer is even bigger than the first. Now he prays that those people, who have been strengthened by the message of the gospel, who have been **"rooted and established in love,"** will now have more power. This time, he prays for power to know something. He prays that God give them the power to know Christ's love.

And once again, maybe Paul is overshooting a bit here. Is it really that hard to know Christ's love? Even little children know that! They sing, "Jesus loves me. This I know." And yet Paul asks for the great power of God to come and help his people to know the love of Christ, because the love of Christ, he says, surpasses knowledge. It's more than we can know.

Perhaps that's because love like that is completely foreign to us—completely foreign to our sinful nature. Our sinful nature would prefer to act like people stranded in flood waters who fire shots at rescuers. It can't understand God's love and really doesn't feel the need for it.

But there are others who have been crushed by the load of their sins. They feel sickened by what they've done and isolated from God and others because of it. They, too, have a hard time understanding God's love because they aren't sure it's really for them. They're stranded and don't know if anyone will reach them in time.

So Paul prays that God would come with his mighty power and help his people, help them to **"grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ."** He wants them to see that no matter how far you've wandered, how deep you've sunk, his love will still reach you. And when you have found that Christ's love has spread through every place, and has reached you at every phase of your life, every place you have been, you might begin to sense that Jesus loves you even more than you know.

And still, Paul asks to know more. He prays **"that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."** Even though Christ's love surpasses knowledge, I pray that you would continue to learn it until you are filled to the measure of the fullness of God—until you know Christ's love like God does.

Paul prays an impossible request—to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, to know this love that surpasses knowledge, to be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God—an impossible request.

“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.” With a confident “Amen!” Paul concludes his prayer with the conviction that God can do even more than the impossible request he has made in this big prayer.

The youngest children in Sunday School can sing to you that they know Jesus’ love. And they do. But their parents bring them, saying, “There’s more.” High school students, in the past couple years (at your confirmation) you confessed that you know Jesus’ love. But you didn’t learn it all. There’s more. For many of you it’s been a while since you first heard of Jesus’ love. And you’ve grown in your spiritual life since then. You have had life experiences that have shown you that Jesus’ love stretches farther than you ever imagined. There’s more. Some of you are in the stage of life when you know you have more years behind you than ahead of you. And you know Jesus’ love. You know that as life changes, the love of Jesus is one thing that will remain the same. Yes, it will remain, but there’s even more. Jesus loves us more than we know.

People can look at a natural disaster and say that it is the greatest display of power they have ever seen. Or they witness a space shuttle launch and are amazed at the extreme force necessarily to make it happen. But that’s nothing compared to the power God has at work here, in us. For this is God’s power to help his people. Jesus comes and lives in the hearts of his people by faith. He comes to us in the gospel, his Word and Sacraments. Jesus loves us more than we can ever know, so we spend our lives learning to know it even more. **“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.”**