

Glory to the One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. Amen.

Since I have started preparing for this sermon, I have not been able to take my eyes away from our reading from the Letter to the Ephesians. It doesn't have the same pace of a narrative passage, where you keep track of the characters moving through the world, like our Gospel passage. It doesn't read like other Pauline letters, or at least, the parts of Paul's letters where he is giving more matter of fact advice, like "*stop your bickering and arguing, please!*" or "*you misunderstood me completely!*" or "*do not let the rich crowd out the poor from the Lord's table.*" Paul is not trying to work out a practical problem in a community, which is where a lot of his writing is normally focused. His language in the entire Letter of Ephesians does not mention the community it is addressed to or its problems. The Letter instead reminds the community of the great work that has happened in Jesus the Christ, and how the whole world is caught up in it. The context of Ephesians is cosmic creation, and it reads more like praise and worship than practical advice for living in community. The author, who is probably a disciple of Paul writing for the next generation of Christians after Paul's death, seems to be working out for a new generation what the Gospel of Christ means for the world and the communities in it. It was a normal practice in the ancient world to write in someone's name and style if you were a part of the next generation of their legacy.¹ The author, who I'll still call Paul for this reason, had an important message in the next generation of Christians, as original disputes settled down and larger theological insights began to cohere, and though it is not as practical as the first generation Paul, I find dwelling in God's cosmic work in Christ has insights for us to glean in a fiercely divided church and world.

It's not uncommon to hear someone protest about Ephesians: "*Paul needs an editor!*" While it is probably true that an editor would make Paul more clear and less

¹ This is not an academic paper so I can direct those interested to the Wikipedia page that lays out the context and conversation around 'authentic' and 'pseudepigraphal' letters of Paul: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authorship_of_the_Pauline_epistles

wordy, I have to say I am grateful for the times Paul lets his excitement take over. When Paul gets excited, his language becomes less grammatically precise and more dramatically alive. It's one of Paul's most endearing traits to me: it reminds me of when I am listening to anyone swept up in talking about the topic that excites them the most. Excitement is contagious, and it excites me to see their excitement, and all of a sudden both of us are swept up into something new, something compelling, something much larger than the conversation about the weather we were having minutes before. When excitement meets excitement and when passion is listened to, we are momentarily caught out of our normal day-to-day interactions into something much more mesmerizing. We are drawn outside of our norm, into something new. We become ecstatic, or literally, drawn out of stasis,² propelled into higher regions. And while the higher regions don't put much stock in grammar and syntax, they tend to communicate with their own clarity - the sort of clarity that one can discern in the wise, the poetic, the beautiful. Paul becomes swept up in his own excitement as he conveys the depth of God's work in Christ, and while the letter doesn't mention practical day-to-day matters, his insights carry the wisdom who has seen what community and the church at its best can do, and he urges his audience to remember the stakes and the context of the God who has called them to faith and love in a deeply divided world.

Paul's entire letter to the Ephesians emanates with the conviction of a God whose mysterious love has and is always saturating the universe. We have been conditioned in the 500 years after the Reformation to read a lot of Ephesians (and Paul by extension) with Reformation concerns about faith and works and grace in our minds. While these are relevant questions for people of faith, they are questions that became relevant 1500 years after Paul wrote Ephesians. So while we may hear phrases like "for by grace you have been saved, through faith" and hear well trodden theological paths taken by Reformed theologians, I want us to take a moment to submerge ourselves into the mysterious context of the ancient world, where the

² *Ekstasis* in Greek

scandal was not grace versus works, but grace before time, through time, to the end of time, for all people, always.

Paul introduces this theme after his opening salutation, where Paul usually tells the recipient in each of his letters why he is writing. He writes:

“With all wisdom and insight [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” (NRSV)

God has set out from before the foundation of the world to bring all things together through his Anointed One, through Jesus the Christ. A dimension of this scandal is that no force, no matter how hostile, no god, no matter how grand, and no empire, no matter how powerful, can stop this love from achieving its goal. To those who were ignorant to God, grace saturated their awareness. To those who walked in their own passions and affairs, God’s passion ignited them into deeper love. And Christ’s shameful death by crucifixion at the hands of the powerful and imperial Roman Empire could not stop God’s love in Christ. This cosmic love made manifest in Christ cannot be contained by any force, detained by any enemy, or executed by any state: even death itself dies and yields to life. The same love that raises Jesus the Anointed One from the dead raises us out of our own deaths, whether they are personal, cultural, political, or national, into new life together. And this is the mystery, that all is being made new through Christ, within us, to all creation. Let us hear these words from David Bentley Hart’s translation:

*“God, being rich in mercy because of that great love of his... gave us life along with the Anointed [One, Jesus]... in order that he might show forth the extravagant richness of his grace, in kindness toward us... For you are those who in grace have been saved by faithfulness: and this, God’s gift, is not from you, nor from observances, so that no one may boast.”*³

³David Bentley Hart’s translation can be found here: <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300265705/the-new-testament/>. For a review of David Bentley Hart’s translation

It is God's own faithfulness to the world, faithfulness to the nature of his own mysterious love, that lifts up Christ and all creation into new life together. And this new life brings peace, the peace that surpasses all harmful divisions through that same reconciling love that defies containment, detainment, or execution. God reconciles in Christ by drawing all into this one cosmic body that transcends that which divides, and in Hart's translation, "*killing enmity in himself by making peace.*" To the author of Ephesians, the main illustration of this category is between those who were Jews and those who were Gentiles, which was the first epistemic and cultural division the church had to pray its way through. Of course, more divisions exist, and in our contemporary world we have no shortage of new and old categories of division and enmity.

God's overflowing love in Christ despite all, for all, and with all is that love that brings Paul to his knees in worship. It is in awe of this cosmic mystery, both hidden and manifest, that draws Paul out of himself in ecstatic praise and worship. Seeing this mystery made manifest is not a one time event, though. It is not as if when Paul is writing this letter that all divisions between Jews and Gentiles have ceased. The world's divisions do not need to utterly cease in order to glimpse the beauty of this mystery. There are foretastes of this healing all around, glimmers and shimmers of the divine power deep at work. The world's divisions were not righted when Paul had his revelation, or Peter received his vision, or when the council of Jerusalem agreed that the Gospel was meant for Gentiles as well as Jews. But that does not stop Paul from marveling in the still, small work that participates in the unfathomable, cosmic mystery of God's love: a love who lifts the tides around the harmful divisions between Jews and Gentiles, draws them up together, and heals the enmity that had emerged from their division. For all have come from, are being drawn into, and will be completed in the eternal cosmic Body of Christ, who does not exist in any one "side" of any earthly category for Paul. No one has the right to boast that they were on the "original side" or "right side" of God in Christ, because

and an explanation for his rather eccentric translation choices, see James Parker's review here:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/01/the-new-testament-a-translation-david-bentley-hart/546551/>

that category itself has been made humbly irrelevant in light of God's eternal and mysterious plans for all. No one is right because only God is right, and to know that is to know that God is within you and within all creation in the same way: healing division, bringing peace, raising up in worship, bending knee in awe.

Now, this is high and cosmic language, and anyone who wants a reassurance that divisions still exist in the world despite what God has done in Christ need only read any other letter of Paul, where divisions still exist, and new divisions spring up as soon as people start to call themselves Christians. Or, you can look in the world we live in today, where not only are we divided by nation, culture, politics, religion, or generation. Sadly, often we as Christians are curiously close to the center of many of these contentions, despite our claims to worship the One who transcends division. In our world today, we as Christians need to earnestly engage in self-reflection. How is it that we identify and describe our commitment as Christians in a contemporary world overwhelmed with division? Do we see "Christian" as a category or "side" among other sides like "Jew" or "Gentile" in the ancient world? When we name ourselves as Christians, are we identifying ourselves in a divisive spirit that contributes to enmity and strife? How are we to reflect this healing and reconciling love to a broken and divided world if our own identity contributes to that division? If we distinguish ourselves as "Christian" in such a way that creates enmity or discord, do we not stand uncomfortably against the reconciling work that God in Christ is overcoming in his own Body? We hold much more power than Paul and his Christians did in the ancient world - and I fear that in the intervening 2000 years we as Christians have gravely misrepresented the cosmic mystery of God in Christ. How do we reclaim that power of that reconciling legacy that brings Paul to his knees in wonder and praise? How do we live out the reconciling promise of God in Christ in a world where those bearing the name Christian have been responsible for divisions, discord, enmity, and hate?

I am not saying that we should not identify as Christians. Because it is not as if God's work in Christ has destroyed all previous distinctions. Distinctions and

differences still exist, and it is very good that they exist. Even in Paul's imagery, distinctions and differences still matter - in Paul's imagery Jews and Gentiles are *united through* Christ. While they leave behind that which creates enmity and discord, they bring with them that which illuminates the rich variety of creation. As Paul writes just before our lesson for today in verse 10, "God [created all things] so that... the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known" (NRSV). Differences contribute to the beauty of God's continuum of creation. Differences illuminate, radiate, and refract that infinite mystery. Our distinct identities matter, and to follow Jesus means to live in the world in a distinctly different way. But the way of Jesus is that which illuminates or refracts the glory of Christ's cosmic Body, not that which puffs up, lords over, or divides it. And ostensibly, being a Christian means to nurture and value the distinctions and differences we encounter in each other, to love our neighbors' differences in such a way that overcomes discord and overflows into kindness and peace. As we sing in that Christmas hymn *O Holy Night*: "Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother: and in his name all oppression shall cease." We all come from the same lineage, we all were made within the same mysterious love, we all deserve the same loving kindness.

In a world where divisions increase, where are we to turn? Our reading for today is Paul's prayer to those who still experience these tensions. He prays that God will strengthen us in our inner being with that same Spirit that has worked from the foundations of the world for the good of all things. Since God works in all, God works in even the most divisive and hostile parts of our own being, too. Love for all means love for all of our parts, not just the nice parts we are comfortable bringing with us to church. Christ is in our bodies as we are in his Body, and Christ is actively cultivating, fertilizing, and rooting that mysterious love within us. Paul prays that this love that he has experienced continues in her beautiful work. He also prays that we continue to grow in understanding the mysterious depths of that mystery. Paul seems in English to belabor the point quite a bit here - but the words he chooses in Greek have subtle differences. "The power to comprehend" in verse 18 emphasizes how an individual comes to comprehend a reality for oneself, how one appropriates

and contextualizes information for one's own pattern of living.⁴ It focuses on how each of us as people are invited to incorporate God's grace living within us in our own unique way, woven within the tapestry of our own identities. Paul's prayer is that this grace, available to all, will uniquely refract within everyone who turns inward to address it. And "the power to know the love of Christ," in verse 19 refers to the intimate, emotional knowledge that comes from loving someone deeply, not just an intellectual or rational knowledge.⁵ This kind of knowledge savors the depth and intensity of that mysterious love as one might savor the depth and intensity of love after 60 years of marriage. And these two types of knowledge compound and play off of each other: as we grow to love and know God in Christ more deeply, we come to know what Christ's love means more for ourselves and our place in the world around us. More love allows for more understanding of what that love means for your own life, and more understanding of that love allows for a deeper savoring and abiding within that love. And while I imagine all of us have a way to go before we understand all the fullness of God's love, Paul's prayer is that God's own infinite love becomes more deeply inscribed within our own living and our own loving, that we are not only saved by God's grace, but grow into God's own likeness.

Which leaves me with the benediction - the prayer I opened this sermon with. Our comprehension, apprehension, and loving only go so far. Our language, our minds, our bodies, are as of yet limited in their capacity to "fully" know. But that does not matter. The power at work within us does not depend on us knowing or comprehending it. It's not up to us. It is a gift from God, not of our own doing. That gift is at work within us, no matter who we are, where we are from, or how we understand it. It is a gift hidden in the mysteries of the cosmos since the foundation of the sun and stars, an energy that pervades the cosmic field, where each of us is quantumly linked to the eternal divine mystery. And this power is with us, not against us, and will continue its work, which is far above anything anyone has ever been able to conceive. And if you think about all the brilliant people who have

⁴ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2638/kjv/tr/0-1/>

⁵ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1097/kjv/tr/0-1/>

conceived brilliant things, that is a staggering thought. The God of quarks, quantum entanglement, and quasars is the God who is working faith, hope, and love within us. So while our divisions endure, while we contemplate our role in them, and while we strive for peace, may we also rest in assurance that this God will never, ever, abandon what has been started. We may not be able to see it - God knows how often I have looked around at our political climate with despair - but my ability to not see it does not mean it is not happening.

The final lines of “Christmas Bells” by Henry Longfellow remind me of this great cosmic power despite all evidence otherwise:⁶

*And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"*

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.*

May it be so. Amen.

⁶ <https://poets.org/poem/christmas-bells>