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Ephesians 3:14-21 (NRSV)

*<sup>14</sup> For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. <sup>16</sup> I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, <sup>17</sup> and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. <sup>18</sup> I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. <sup>20</sup> Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

This prayer occurs in the middle of the book of Ephesians, at a transition point between the first 3 chapters, which contain theological teachings, and the last 3 chapters, which contain an appeal to the community to live as people who live in Christ. The author presents a new social order for Christians. They are bound together in the unity of the body of Christ, to live radical new lives founded in love for one another without regard to their old ways, their social standing, or their positions within their households.

The theological teaching of Ephesians is the message of salvation by grace through faith. The author reminds the readers that they have all been blessed by God with an inheritance through Christ. They have been given new life in Christ. This community is a result of Christ's having "broken down the dividing wall" (Eph 2:14) between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, Gentiles who were once foreigners, living outside the covenant between God and the people of Israel. No longer are they people without God. "The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel." (Eph 3:6) The theme of unity is both cosmic, addressing the mystery of God's power and will in the universe, and more everyday, addressing the lives of individuals in their households and the community. But, these elements of the theme of unity are connected. The church is God's new creation for all of humanity.

Paul's mission was to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. The message to the Gentiles is to reject their past ways, their "trespasses and sins," (Eph 2:1) to embrace their new life. The Jewish Christians, those who had the law, are to set aside the traditions and legalistic barriers to being reconciled and united with the Gentiles. These two groups are to be reconciled with one another and live together as one. The strength and witness of this community is their unity, their oneness in Christ. Their lives have been changed by Christ; they should live accordingly. The applications that follow in chapters 4-6 provide models for being in the world but not of the world and living according to the example of Christ. It begins with the well-known passage on unity in the body of Christ. (Eph 4:1-16)

The transition in today's scripture and the transformation from doctrine to practice, from theological teaching to living faithfully as followers of Christ, begins with prayer. Shouldn't we always begin with prayer?

John Wesley viewed prayer as fundamental to spiritual growth and chief among the "means of grace," where he defined a "means of grace" as "a channel through which the grace of God is conveyed." (John Wesley Sermon 16) This prayer reflects aspects of Wesley's view of grace.

Paul, who is imprisoned for the sake of his audience, bows his knees to pray. His posture in prayer is that of supplication, praying earnestly for three things:

- First, that the community be strengthened by the Spirit so that Christ may live in their hearts;
- Second, that being "rooted and grounded in love" they may understand the scope of God's love;
- And third, that they "may be filled with all the fullness of God."

This prayer reflects the Christian life and growing in faith and grace. The three elements of this prayer reflect a Wesleyan view of grace. Prevenient grace, that which goes before, is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives even before we are aware. This grace is available to all and prepares us to receive Christ and to grow in faith. Thus being prepared, we encounter justifying grace. Justification, being made right with God, begins with understanding, knowing the "breadth and length and height and depth" (Eph 3:18) of God's love and the assurance of forgiveness that comes from repentance and acceptance of our sacred worth and of God's will that we be reconciled with God. The third element reflects sanctifying grace. Sanctification is the Methodist idea of "going on to perfection," being made perfect in love. Sanctification is a continuing process of growing in grace and faith to be "filled with all the fullness of God," wholeness, and "maturity," conforming to the "full stature" or image of Christ. Sanctification is a process (or a journey) of growing in love with God and neighbor.

The prayer concludes by proclaiming God's power to extend salvation to all. That power is greater than we can imagine. And, that power, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, is at work in all of us. With that power, we must see ourselves as interconnected members of the body of Christ, united in purpose and called to live lives that reflect the image of Christ and to live our lives because of Christ.

The author of Ephesians shares a message of good news for all people. We recognize that all are made in the image of God, formed by God's own hand, connected with all of creation, and breathed into with the breath of life. And, such was the love of God for humankind that God sent his only son so that the darkness may be filled with light and that we might know God through Christ. Let us look upon each day as a new beginning, filled with God's grace, and always an opening to grow deeper in faith and love.

Amen