

When In Doubt...

July 29, 2018

[Scripture Focus: Ephesians 3: 14 - 21]

The world changes. I'm not always sure what to do. Now days, even the church seems lost. What to do... We too often can't identify why we exist or what we should do next. That's what we'll be talking about this morning.

Let's take a closer look at the text from Ephesians 3: 14-21 that Howard read earlier.

SCRIPTURE

From reading the New Testament, we learn (in the second chapter of Acts) that the "church age" began in Jerusalem, at Pentecost. It looked and acted little like today's church. However, it grew rapidly through the ministry of the apostles and the early believers. On three courageous journeys, Paul and his colleagues established churches in scores of Gentile cities.

The church in Ephesus was one of the more prominent church locations. It was established around 53 AD as Paul journeyed home to Jerusalem. He returned a year later; teaching and preaching there for three years. Years later, Paul was imprisoned in Rome. While in prison, he received multiple visitors from Ephesus and was prompted to write a letter to the Ephesians - not to confront a problem - but to encourage the Ephesian church. In the letter (and the Book of Ephesians), Paul describes the nature and appearance of the church and challenges believers to function as the living body of Christ on earth.

Let me read the text that Howard read earlier using The Message...

My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner

strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in.

And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.

God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.

Glory to God in the church!

Glory to God in the Messiah, in Jesus!

Glory down all the generations!

Glory through all millennia!

I often read from The Message. I realize that some of you may wonder why I do this - rather than reading only from the pew Bible. From the publisher - about The Message... *Language changes. New words are formed. Old words take on new meaning. There's a need in every generation to keep the language of the gospel message current, fresh and understandable; the way it was for its very first readers. That is what The Message seeks to accomplish for contemporary readers. Its a version for our time, designed to be read by contemporary people in the same way as the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts were savored by people thousands of years ago.*

SO WHAT?

In the very first verse of today's text, we hear Paul encouraging the people of Ephesus (and us today) to get down on our knees and pray for strength through the Holy Spirit.

Paul prays that the Ephesians would have the power to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we might be filled with the fullness of God.

I mentioned earlier that (like me) today's church often seems lost. We've forgotten why we exist. The world's changing and we don't know what to do. Maybe we should just start praying. That shouldn't seem like such a radical concept; the church praying...

But when in doubt, the correct answer has always been to pray.

Admitting that some things are beyond our control is hard to do. We are convinced that we're so smart and so strong and always know exactly how to fix everything but there's this reality that we're not God. We're smart and strong but not as smart and strong as the God who created the world and everything in it.

Last year, I was meeting with a group that I called the Starting With Why group to try to get a sense of the future for this church. We met several times in the typical Presbyterian fashion; we'd get together, watch a video or do a study and then talk. I think that we'd all agree that we never really seemed to accomplish anything!

A member of the group then suggested that we get together to pray - instead of following an agenda. We began meeting on Tuesday nights. We'd chat a bit; pray in the the Parlor; then walk around the church (especially in the Sanctuary) and ask God to make His presence known to us. We'd pay particular attention to the table, the music ministry (choir and organ) and the pulpits. We'd also walk thought other parts of the church (like the nursery) and simply pray. When in doubt...

I noticed after a few weeks that things been to change. A church member came up to me and told me that they felt an improved focus on their faith journey. Some of the men of the church went on our annual retreat. On Sunday morning, during our time of open prayer, I noticed that almost everyone in the room shared in prayer. While these things seem inconsequential, I thought of them as an answer to prayer.

When our Tuesday night prayer group met, I shared these experiences with them and smacked myself in the forehead and said “What did we think would happen? Why are we surprised?”

Honestly if we didn’t think that God would answer our prayers, why were we praying in the first place? Maybe that’s part of the problem... We don’t feel confident that God will respond to our prayers.

Maybe many of us have prayed and not seen or heard God respond (immediately). Or maybe God responded in a way that didn’t match what we wanted. Maybe we prayed that God’s will would be done and it was. Unfortunately, some times God’s will and our will are not the same...

In retrospect, I find it so strange that I was surprised that when we prayed, God responded. I’m excited that a new group is assembling on this coming Tuesday morning to begin praying regularly. You know what I say? When in doubt, you can never go wrong by praying.

Seems to me that most of us are faced with dilemmas that we are not trained to handle. I’ve never taken a marriage class or a parenting class or a how to handle it when your parents are aging and ailing class. Maybe the first step in becoming a better spouse or parent or son or daughter, isn’t to read a “how to” book but to ask God to show you the way. Strange how that’s not usually our first choice.

When Jeff first shared that we might be able to have a pre-school move into our building, I thought to myself that this is an answer to prayer. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see that like most mainline American churches, our congregation is

aging. For years, this problem has been an oncoming freight train. Everyone (including) Stevie Wonder saw this problem coming...

I mentioned to Jeff that unless our congregation responds faithfully to this opportunity, it will be like lots of things the church does. We put on an event, people come and then we're surprised that the folks who came to the special event are not in church on the following Sunday and don't become active participants in this community of faith.

Many of us see the pre-school as an important opportunity not just to have new families here on Sunday but to be a resource for families who come to Providence. It's a win-win; new people come to the church and we have the honor of walking alongside these folks as they go through life's ups and downs. For those of you who have just begun to be with us over the last month or two, know that there are people in this place who are already praying for you; not just that you keep coming to church but that God will become a focus in your life. Both God and this congregation will be there for you!

NOW WHAT?

In today's text, Paul wasn't judging the Ephesians. The way I see it, he was encouraging them to keep on praying. I think that's where we are at Providence. It's hard to keep historical ministries alive in church today. What was once a vital ministry for churches, may have run its course. Times have changed. My friend, Kerry Westerwick, used to say "sometimes those ministries that are vital simply lose their purpose and the congregation no longer has the energy to keep them alive."

I met with the Care Team last week and shared that when I got together with the Christian Education committee when I first came here four years ago, I asked them why they did Vacation Bible School. The silence was deafening. There was no wrong answer but the church had VBS because the church had always had VBS. Sometimes, things have to completely disappear before they can be transformed into something new and vital.

I feel like that's what we've seen happen under Connie and Donna Rae's leadership with Wonder Filled Wednesdays. Last Wednesday, we had (26) children and (36) adults on hand. That's not just great news because of the attendance number but because these are new faces who are also here on Sunday morning. There are families who are here because of the pre-school and folks who are here because they were personally invited by existing members of the congregation. These are answered prayers.

What about praying for our children's ministry or our middle/high school age group or young adults? As you'll see in next month's newsletter, we're going to be asking you to participate in a program that's focused on young adults (18 - 34 year olds). We're going to begin to pray each week for specific folks in that age group.

The group will include those who we see every week; those we only see on Christmas, Easter or Mother's Day and those we haven't seen in years. The goal is to ask God to watch over the complicated lives of young adults.

We'll also be sending cards (that you'll be invited to sign during fellowship) to let these folks know that the church is praying for them. When in doubt, pray!

I've often heard folks say that they want to have active prayer lives but don't feel that they know how to pray. For many folks, praying to God is as easy as having a conversation with a friend. For others, they're afraid that they'll say something wrong or just won't pray the way God wants them to pray. I'm convinced that God doesn't have a scorecard that tracks grammar errors!

In today's sermon notes, instead of giving you three points to monitor our proximity to the sermon's conclusion (since I didn't really complete the sermon until this morning), I listed some resources for those who think that they need additional assistance with prayer.

The first is one of my very favorite resources for devotionals or prayer. For the phone, it's an app called "you version." On your computer, search "bible.com." Both are excellent ways to find and organize your faith life. You'll find material on marriage, parenting, how to read through the Bible or any other topic that you can imagine. It's all available in a very organized, easy-to-use fashion that will keep you on track. If you miss a daily devotion, it will even bug you to death until you catch up!

I also want to remind you that on October 3, Jeff will begin a Weekly Wednesday night study on prayer. Come join us for dinner and a time of study and fellowship focused on prayer.

If you're a reader, you can go to Amazon and search "prayer." Don't be overcome by the 50,000+ options that Amazon gives you. Feel free to ask Jeff or me for an appropriate option. I have lots of inventory that could be helpful when it comes to prayer!

Finally, I am confident that this coming Tuesday morning's prayer gathering will be excellent. When we gathered on Tuesday nights, I found that my prayer life was enhanced. Frankly, I'm just like everyone else. There are times when I'm really focused on prayer (like when I need God to intervene in my life) and there are times that I feel too busy to pray (which is insane since the truth is that if I feel too busy to pray, I should be praying more!). If you can't be there on Tuesday morning and would like to participate, feel free to let me know if there's a date and time that would work best for you to participate in the future and I'll share that on Tuesday.

I mentioned earlier that I had met with our Care Team last week at their monthly meeting. In case you don't know what the Care Team does, 35 or forty folks in the church have agreed to maintain contact with the membership of the church and to be a conduit for sharing our member's concerns with our pastoral staff. This is a very important and time consuming effort!

I shared with them that I appreciate and applaud their efforts. I also shared that I would encourage them to pray for the families that they care for and that I think it helpful that PPC families know that they are the focus of prayer for Care Team leaders.

In the same way, I encourage you to dig deeper into your prayer life. Set aside a time to pray. Maybe it's when you go to bed; Maybe it's when you wake up; Maybe it's while you're eating lunch at your desk or in your home.

Don't be afraid to pray for everything (even the small stuff). Don't be put off when you don't hear the answer that you want.

This week, please take the time to...

bow **your** knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 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, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.