

Message: Inner spiritual strength through faith

“Do you have strength?”

I had a humbling experience Saturday while working with the Trustees and the friends who came to church. The group gathered to do an outdoor cleanup, with the goal to clean the church grounds along the main road, including the pine trees and the back field. We scheduled two hours, expecting it might run a little longer.

Toward the end of the morning, I was sitting with some of the other guys and we all commented on how we were tired 30 minutes into the clean up period. We were very glad to have the younger men, along with Michelle Johns. They had the strength and stamina to keep going, even when our energy levels were low.

That experience and our Scripture verse for today, Ephesians 3:14-21, made me think about strength. What is strength? Strength is a demonstration of power. Power is attractive. Power used with control to help others is good, a positive. Love of power is also one of the world’s greatest temptations, much like the love of money (1 Timothy 6:10). Satan tempted Jesus with power (Matthew 4:6). A desire for power can never be satisfied. We will always want more. Uncontrolled use of power for our own benefit at the expense of others is evil, a negative. Our passage talks about strength and power, but it does so in a way we might not expect. Let’s take a few minutes to explore the text, beginning with some background on the Ephesian church.

Paul wrote to the congregation at Ephesus to encourage them to be a church known for their faith and unity. This church is very much like today’s modern church, particularly churches in the LA area. The city had wealth. It was located on the coast, so it was a center of trade and travel. There was great temptation due to idolatry and great pride in the city. Sound familiar? These are all factors that influenced the members of the congregation. The church is worthy of praise because it’s members are faithful: they believe in salvation through Jesus, the Christ. This is noteworthy, given the temptations they faced and the opposition the community would have toward them. That, too, is more and more like the church in southern California today.

However, there is another reason the members of the congregation at Ephesus are praised: they understand the equality of Jews and Gentiles who believe in Christ. No longer is there separation on the basis of birthright, religious ritual or Scriptural understanding. Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus are united by one thing: faith. Today, that’s what we mean we talk about ecumenical relationships between churches. As United Methodists, we believe the essentials of faith are more important than the opinions of faith. That’s why we reach out to, and work with, many denominations.

Paul was so moved by the faith of the Ephesian church he fell to his knees before God in prayer (vv14-15)! That doesn’t seem like such a big thing, but when was the last time you went to your knees before God because you were moved by someone else’s faith? That posture isn’t one the Jews practiced and it’s not common for many of us, either. For Paul to make this gesture is a powerful statement of his reverence, submission and love for God. We should keep it in mind during our conversation with God: do you ever feel moved to pray with your head bowed? On your knees? Lying facedown before God?

Paul’s gesture helps us to understand the nature of the passage we are reading. Verses 16-21 are a record of Paul’s prayer on behalf of the congregation at Ephesus and all to whom the letter was circulated. Verses 20-21 are a benediction, ending in “*amen*”, which also means “*may it be so.*” This prayer applies to us today as well. The letter has circulated to us and we are a congregation facing many of the same challenges as the church at Ephesus. We are certainly challenged by the culture, but we are also in danger of losing our first love, our devotion to Jesus. Paul teaches us about the richness and fullness of God’s glory in his prayer. Let’s look at it briefly.

To begin, we need to turn back to Ephesians 3:10-12, “... *through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.*” God intentionally sent Jesus to us, to save us so we might come to God with boldness and confidence, through

faith. We don't have to worry about judgment if we love and follow Jesus. God's love overcomes sin and death to give us victory and life eternal in heaven. A God who can do that is certainly worthy of our love, obedience and awe.

Paul's prayer is bold and confident, based on his love of God. There are three parts: vv16-17, where we are strengthened, vv18-19, where we are given power, and vv20-21, where Paul gives God the glory.

What kind of strength does Paul pray for God to grant us? Is it physical strength like we see demonstrated by the women and men in the CrossFit games or in football, baseball, soccer, basketball, tennis or hockey stadiums? No. The kind of strength Paul prays for is strength in our “*inner being*” (v16). This is the strength of our spirit and character, which includes our will. This strength is what enables us to continue on, even when we are exhausted physically, mentally and emotionally. This is the strength of Job, who refused to turn away from God, even after he lost his children, business and health. This is the strength of someone who is faithful to God through addiction, violence, starvation, cancer, surgery, divorce and even death and the loss of loved ones.

Faith and love for Jesus is the answer. The reason it is the answer is found in the source, the power, of our inner strength. That source is God's Spirit. When we are faithful to Christ, we are given a gift, the Holy Spirit, which takes root inside us. Love is the soil: the love of Jesus for us. Our inner being is nurtured by that love until it sprouts and grows, strong and true, with roots firmly planted in Christ and his love.

Paul's prayer continues. Given strength of spirit, character and will, he prays for us to have power. But Paul isn't praying for power as the world desires it. He doesn't pray for us to have political, economic or social power – it isn't about position, money or fame. Paul doesn't pray for us to have power over others or even power over our own body, mind or emotions. Paul's desire is for us – individually and as a community of faith, to be able to grasp, glimpse and know the unknowable. Paul prays for us to be able to know the love of Christ.

Christ's love is so wide it covers the whole world and goes beyond it. Christ's love is so long it has no limits, it's eternal. Christ's love is so

high it reaches to the heavens, the universe and beyond. Christ’s love is so deep it reaches into the very depths of hell to save us, no matter whether the hell is one of our own making or one we are trapped in by the will of others. Christ’s love changes all things. When we accept Christ, Jesus comes to live in our heart. And that changes us, from the inside out. We may resist at times or lose our way in the busy-ness of the activities and distractions of life. Jesus never gives up on us. Jesus’ love is constant and true. Jesus’ love doesn’t depend on whether we’re having a good day or a bad day, whether we want to obey or rebel, whether we are the elder child or the prodigal child returning. Jesus’ love is rich, deep and true. Gradually and progressively, it fills us with the richness of God. Our inner being, our spirit, character and mind become more like Christ as we grow in his love.

That’s worth a “amen”! Paul lifts us up to God in the final stanza of his prayer. Paul reminds us that it’s God’s power that is at work within us, not human strength. God will accomplish more than we can imagine or ask, more than our children can imagine or ask, and more than their children can imagine or ask, for generations to come. The reason: the work of Christ brings glory and honor to God. All we are called to do is to have faith, ask and follow Jesus. Our love for Christ is to be devoted. We should be inspired and willing to do what is needed to keep our love of God fresh and to serve others because we want to express God’s love.

There is a final note of warning, though. John writes about the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7, giving them praise and a warning. The congregation is praised because they have persevered during hardship and they have faithfully and diligently followed Christ. Our church deserves praise too, for we have come through hardship over the past ten years. The congregation in Ephesus is warned because they have abandoned the love that originally characterized their lives, the love of Christ. They are working and serving hard, but they have lost their devotion to Christ. This is a danger for us today in our congregation as well. Let us be warned! It’s easy to get caught up in becoming ministry experts, doing tasks rather than seeking and finding a deeper passion for Christ. There needs to be a balance. Without it, we will be like salt that has lost it’s saltiness (Matthew 5:13). The only thing to do with it is

discard it. If we do not repent and seek Jesus first in our lives, we will lose our place. We will no longer be faithful witnesses of Christ’s love to our friends, family, children and community.

I pray your love for Jesus is faithful and true. Much like the love for a spouse, we have to learn to be intentional and loving once the honeymoon phase is over. My prayer for you is that you will keep your love for Christ alive through conversation with God, time listening to and reading God’s Word, and through relationships with other believers. I pray our devoted love for Christ will inspire faithful demonstration of our love and passion through acts of charity and service to others.

Is that worth an amen? May it be so!

Ephesians 3:14-21 (NRSV)

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 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, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 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, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.