

Sermon: Sunday, July 25, 2021

A Prayer for You
Ephesians 3:14 – 21

Oh my! What a powerful prayer from Paul, the pastor of the church at Ephesus. This is not a prayer of lofty words, or silver-tongued eloquence. This is the pastor, down on his knees, pouring out his heart for his people. “I bow my knees before God,” Paul says. No place to kneel in our churches. People seem to have a problem with kneeling, even though it is the most natural, the humblest, the most beautiful way to express obedience to God.

There’s a special connection between Paul and Ephesus: Love, empathy, and deep compassion. Luke describes Paul’s final meeting with the Executive Board of the Ephesus Church: “When he had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed. There was much weeping among them all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, grieving especially because of what he had said, that they would not see him again. Then they brought him to the ship.”

In other cities, sometimes Paul had to leave town under the cover of darkness., but he lasted longer in Ephesus than any other place. In Corinth, there were knock-down, drag-out fights. In Galatia, church members were deserting the gospel and Paul addresses them as “you foolish Galatians!” In Philippi, two women named Euodia and Syntyche were causing trouble. In Colossae, the church was fascinated by “mysterious things,” what we would now call “new age religion.” Fred Craddock said that they had a practice that could be translated as “walked in the middle of the air.” A bunch of drug users or liberals, huh? In Thessalonica, a much more conservative bunch, the church members were quitting their jobs and waiting for what they thought would be the immediate return of Jesus. Paul had to talk tough to them: “If you don’t work, you don’t eat.”

In Ephesus, Paul has a pastoral honeymoon, like an extended interim. Peaches and cream. Love and enjoyment. People take him home for dinner. They buy him tickets to Broadway, to Yankees and Mets games, dinners at the best restaurants, to the museums. They brag on his preaching. Preachers, dream, you know.

In Ephesus, Paul spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. There's the intellectual content: argument, persuasion, rhetoric, philosophy, theology. Then as we saw earlier, "They embraced Paul and kissed him." There's the emotional content. The Christian life is intelligence, but it is also emotion. Intelligence without emotion/passion can turn into sheer boredom. Yet pure emotion can turn into empty praise that may sound godly but has no root in the tree of theology.

Have we forgotten? Jesus insists, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your **mind**." Love God with heart and mind. BIG HEARTS AND BIG BRAINS!

Paul prays that we will comprehend, an intellectual practice. There's a difference between apprehend and comprehend. Apprehend means to mentally come up against a subject and not be able to wrap the mind around it, understand it, or make complete sense of it. Comprehend denotes the embracing or understanding it totally. Paul prays for us the impossible, but he is determined that we make this gigantic effort to comprehend as much of God as possible. And he tells us that it all has to do with God's love for us. The beginning of knowledge is knowing that God loved us before we loved God. Paul says we need "necessary knowledge. Knowledge is learning to love God because God loved us first.

Comprehending God's love is difficult work at times. But we have been given resources to sustain this work each time we gather to share the meal of bread and wine – brain food. Scientists tell us that fish, coffee (Coffee makes you smarter), blueberries, turmeric, broccoli (Don't tell George Bush), pumpkin seeds, dark chocolate, nuts (sounds oxymoronic), oranges, eggs, and green tea make the best brain foods. Sorry beer drinkers. I'm adding communion bread and wine as food for the brain and heart to know the love of God: width, length, height, and depth. This is the deepest sort of intellectual activity as the Spirit activates our brain to think of God.

Christianity has brain work to do. Have you seen all the word game apps that you can download and play claiming they will increase your brain power and your memory? I like the game Ruzzle where you find as many words as possible in 60 seconds from a square filled with 16 letters. This is sound psychology and I think Christians increase brain power – wisdom, prudence, studiousness, knowledge – with prayer and the sacraments and worship and reading. I'm not claiming we are smarter than anyone else, but we are engaged in the journey of being smart Christians.

The intellect, however, is not capable of producing revolutionary, radical Christianity alone. Something more is needed. Aristotle calls it pathos or emotion. Paul also prays that we will have a real passion for our faith. There's an emotional aspect to Paul's prayer.

Somehow, we need to be less turned off by the emotional aspect of faith – the loving God with all our hearts. We have a modern term for the need for emotional power: Emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman gets credit for the beginning of the study of emotional intelligence. Goleman studied in India where he spent time with spiritual teacher Neem Karoli Baba. His book, *Emotional Intelligence*, was on the best seller list of the NYT for 18 months. Goleman says, "In a very real sense we have two minds, one that thinks and one that feels."

He tells the story of a samurai: "A belligerent samurai, an old Japanese tale goes, once challenged a Zen master to explain the concept of heaven and hell. The monk replied with scorn, "You're nothing but a lout - I can't waste my time with the likes of you!"

His very honor attacked, the samurai flew into a rage and, pulling his sword from its scabbard, yelled "I could kill you for your impertinence."

"That," the monk calmly replied, "is hell."

Startled at seeing the truth in what the master pointed out about the fury that had him in its grip, the samurai calmed down, sheathed his sword, and bowed, thanking the monk for the insight.

"And that," said the monk "is heaven."

The sudden awakening of the samurai to his own agitated state illustrates the crucial difference between being caught up in a feeling and becoming aware that you are being swept away by it.

Do you sense that we are in danger of being swept away by tsunamis of dangerous emotions disconnected from wisdom and prudence and common sense? Emotional intelligence may now matter more than IQ.

Christianity, practiced under the influence of Jesus, is a form of emotional intelligence. Scripture is chock full of such examples of emotional intelligence, but they are not doing us much good. They lie around inside a closed Bible as if they were scraps of ancient manuscripts stuffed in a cracked clay pot, hidden in a cave in the mountains. Imagine that these passages were discovered today by a group of archaeologists in a dig in Israel. Imagine they published their findings and people were able to read these passages as if for the first time.

Suppose one of the fragments of Scripture was from Ephesians 4: “So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

I pray for you that you will have an enlightened comprehension as you know more and more of the width, length, depth, and height of the love of God. I pray that you will be filled with all the fullness of God. When Jesus dwells in your hearts through faith, this is the intellectual and emotional power you will receive. The Lord is passing through this morning and if you will but turn to him, he will open the eyes of your heart and give you the love that surpasses knowledge. He will give you spiritual sight.

May you have the power that expands your mind and enflames your heart as you do the work of loving God with all your heart and all your mind.