

Filled with Power

Proper 12 - Year B - 07/25/2021

Psalm Reading: 145:10-18

1st Reading: 2 Kings 4:42-44, 2nd: Ephesians 3:14-21

Our reading today from Ephesians is a brief prayer followed by a doxology. And Paul begins by telling the Ephesians that he is praying on his knees. (v.14, NIV) And you are probably thinking, what is so remarkable about that? We always think of the ancients on their knees. Most of the paintings of the masters have everyone from Paul to Augustine on their knees with a halo around their head as they bring their petitions to God.

But actually, back in the day, kneeling for public prayer was an exception rather than the rule. Common prayer was actually done the way we will often do it, standing, with our hands turned upward. In ancient times, if feeling very penitent, one might lay on the floor face down signifying total humility and subjection to God's will.

But there are several places in the Bible where people pray on their knees. This was most often done by devout figures understanding the imminence of their mortality, Christ at Gethsemane, and Stephen the Martyr before he is stoned are two examples.¹ But kneeling was also a position people took in or order to ask for a favor from someone more powerful. So we might see this comment from Paul that he is praying on his knees that he might know of the end that awaits him during his

¹ NIB IX 414

imprisonment in Rome. Perhaps he is devoutly praying some of his final, thoughtful, hopes for the Ephesians.

He is kneeling before God, the “one from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.” (v.15) He is signifying the power of God as Creator here, and reminding people what they owe to God. And **power** will become one of the major themes in this prayer. In fact, the word “power” is used three times in this very short reading, and it even takes different forms in the original Greek.

Paul writes, “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power (*dunamis*) through the Spirit in your inner being.” (v.16) The Greek word for “power” here is *δύναμις*. Which, in this case, seems to mean strength, staying power or perseverance. This, strength of power is what we often call will power. I think it is a restraining power in many ways keeping us from sin, and unhealthy activities. And I think unhealthy activities are, if you think about it, is a sin, too. God gave us these bodies, and if we do not treat them with care we are not respecting the gift of life that God gave us.

Story about smoking cigars...

Not only should we avoid hurting ourselves, we should refrain from hurting others. But this form of will power also has an active side, prompting us to do things we should do but we may not want to do, like volunteer, get up from the television set after the fifth episode of Game of Thrones, open the Bible and do some delving into the Word of God, or just finding the courage to talk about your faith to some inquisitive neighbor.

As Paul notes, this power he wants for us makes it “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” (v.17) So, this is a power that inspires us and makes us firm in the faith.

In the next couple of verses we find out about another power that Paul prays that God give us, and this power stems from the fact that our faith is “rooted and established in love.” (v.17) It is a different kind of power, a power of capability. In the original Greek it is *ἐξισχύσητε* (*ekischusayte*) – which really means: to be able. It is a capability. You know, in Spanish, the word for power is “poder”, and it is the same word that means “to be able or capable of”.² In English we commonly use this meaning for power as well, it is not only a force creating activity, but the ability to do something. And the power that Paul wants for us is the power to understand *infinity*...

It is the power to “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.” That, my friends, is infinite. Barclay, in his commentary on Galatians and Ephesians writes about the image of an infinite cross.³

Up to Heaven

Down to the depths of even hell.

To all who encompass our universe, planets, stars, and people...

No matter where they stand in politics, theology, or economic scale.

Yet the focus is on the very center of the cross, where all comes together.

² <https://www.spanishdict.com/translate/be%20able%20to>

³ Barclay, Galatians and Ephesians, 155.

If we can understand this crucial point, we can move toward God. Yet Paul tells us at this point that the love of God exceeds all knowledge. Sheer intellectual understanding is insufficient to fully get it.

I am sure that some of you here have had a transcendent experience, a moment of time when you glimpsed something seemingly beyond the material world. It can come from nature. Perhaps you have had a mountaintop experience. Perhaps it came when you held your first child. I have had a few, one was in this very sanctuary:

Sun coming up in the east on a late fall morning
streaming through the stained glass windows.

There is power in those experiences with nature, in church, and with one another, power in the infinite dimensions of the cross, power in the love of Christ in our hearts.

You will notice that all of this power that we are talking about comes from one source. It is the power of God. And we hear about this in the Doxology that Paul constructs. He writes, “Now to God who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to God’s **power** that is **at work** within us, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (v.20-21)

The noun for “power” here is the Greek word “Δυναμένω”, but Paul adds that this power is “ἐνεργουμένην”, which the NIV Bible translates as “at work” – but I think we might go a step further. You might recognize in this Greek word, ἐνεργουμένην our own word “energy”. So we might think of it as filling us with energy, and for this we thank God!

Now, I think this is a powerful passage for us to consider, and not just because it speaks to God's power and what it does for us, but because it has practical application in our lives. In all of our lives we have had moments of despair, times when we felt disconnected from God and each other. Times when we were ashamed, or didn't know what to do.

We have all had those experiences. There were times when I said the wrong thing, times when I made the wrong decision in my finances, even times when I felt the very forces of history and nature were set to overwhelm me. There are times when we feel we are on the wrong path and yet cannot seem to find a new way forward. At one point in my own life, I can remember saying to Robin, "You know, as Christians we have access to the most powerful force in the universe. We just have to access it." And you know what that power is...it is our relationship with God, in the form of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Spirit. By extension it is also our relationships within the Body of Christ. Here at this very church we cultivate all of those relationships.

So, how do we access the power of God? Well, it does begin, as you probably have already assumed, with prayer and with reading God's word. But there is more to it than that. Power is, in effect, movement or at least potential movement. Even a static charge is built up through motion. This means that you have to move from a position where you see yourself as the center of the universe and place God in that position. You have to come to think of God as the energy and the engine that drives you forward, that guides your very existence. If you

recognize that higher power, if you recognize that on your own you are just floundering, that is the first step.

Then you have to remember that you have a giant support system all around you in the form of the Body of Christ. If you look to your right and to your left, you will see quite a few people who care about you and care about how you are doing. These are people who want only the best for you, and with God in the center of your universe you soon come to see that you only want the best for them as well.

The world thinks the power of the church is waning. It was about fifty years ago that time magazine declared that “God is Dead”. What the editors of the magazine failed to realize then is that the power of God has nothing to do with proclamations in magazines or even the number of members in a denomination or a church. The power of God is always and everywhere, only it is up to each individual, each church itself to experience that power for itself, right here in our hearts.

Let’s pray a short prayer based on what Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

“Out of God’s glorious riches may we be strengthened with **power** through the Spirit right down in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. Through our Love for God and for each other may we have power to understand how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. Let us know your love, O Christ, that we may be filled to overflowing the fullness of God. Work in us and through us O Lord!”

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Resources:

NIB Vol XI, p.413-417

Barclay, Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians, 149-156

Calvin's Institutes 3.14.19

<https://biblehub.com/greek/1411.htm>