

“An Unusual Prayer”

Eph. 1:15-23

5/17/20

In a Pearls Before Swine comic strip, Goat and Pig see a dog kneeling in prayer as they walk along.

“Who’s that guy?” asks Pig.

“Praying Puppy. He prays twelve hours a day.”

“How inspirational,” says Pig. “What do you think he prays for?”

Goat replies, “Someone that devoted? Probably just for love and peace in these difficult times.”

In the final frame, we see Praying Puppy with a thought bubble above his head, and we discover what he’s really been praying for- “Treats. More.”

I think many of us struggle to pray the right way, maybe assuming that other people are getting it right while we just can’t get the hang of it! And, during this time of confinement, we have an even greater need for prayer, but some of us are finding it more difficult to make time to pray or to even know how to pray.

Stanley Hauerwas, a former professor of theological ethics at Duke University, says this about prayer: “The plain fact is that we cannot be trusted in prayer. Left to ourselves we become selfish- preoccupied with our pious feelings, our religious progress, our spiritual standing. We need

guides and masters to refocus our attention on God, to keep us ever mindful of the priority of God's word to us."

This morning's scripture lesson from Ephesians 1 gives us a guide for prayer as we read Paul's prayer for the Christians in Ephesus. Here's how he begins. "¹⁵*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason* ¹⁶*I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.*" (Eph. 1:15,16)

He begins by giving thanks, which is an important part of any prayer. Specifically, he gives thanks for their faith in the Lord Jesus, and for their love toward others in the church. Paul often lifts up faith and love as primary marks of the Christian life. And faith and love is where prayer begins- faith that there's a God who hears us and cares about us, and love for others. How are you doing with faith and love?

The prayer continues. "*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him,* ¹⁸*so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,* ¹⁹*and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.*" (Eph. 1:17-19)

This is the part of the prayer we're going to focus on this morning. It's where Paul begins to ask God for what he wants. Specifically, he asks God to give the Ephesians wisdom and revelation. He says that he wants them to be able to see clearly "with the eyes of their hearts enlightened!" Peter Falk was an actor known for his role as a police detective in the TV show, "Columbo," as well as for his role as the grandfather in "The Princess Bride" film. In real life Falk had a glass eye, resulting from an operation to remove a cancerous tumor when he was a child. In spite of the missing eye, Falk played high school baseball. One day, after being wrongly called out at third base, he popped out his eye and handed it to the umpire, saying, "You'll do better with this!" I'm guessing the ump was not amused!

But, that's kind of what Paul is praying for here. He knows that on their own, the Ephesian Christians (like all of us) won't be able to see the reality of their situation because of human limits and self-centered sinfulness. So he prays that the Ephesians would be able to see three things that are very real, but easy to overlook.

First, he wants them to see "*the hope to which God has called you.*" I know many of you are getting discouraged during this bizarre time. You feel lonely or bored or angry or frustrated or fearful. Those are understandable emotions in such a time. But I encourage you not to give in to those emotions and let them dominate you. For you have been called to

hope! Now there is a big-picture hope, an “overarching hope” that most Christians would readily affirm. That our sins have been forgiven and that our eternal future has been secured by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We look forward to a future when Jesus will rule over all things, righting wrongs and ruling justly over God’s creation. A time with no more sickness or dying. That is our overarching hope.

But we need hope right now down here in the trenches, don’t we? Not just a distant future hope! Something more immediate! Writer Anne Lamott describes an incident she experienced as a single mom. When her son, Sam, was about two years old he accidentally locked himself in his bedroom. Through the door, she tried to explain to him how to get out, but he couldn’t understand, and quickly became overwhelmed by fear, sobbing uncontrollably. She called for help, but struggled in vain to comfort him as they waited, until she noticed a small gap under the door. She found that she could squeeze two fingers under there. Sam was able to hold on to them which turned out to be just enough to comfort him until by chance the lock popped and they could open the door. Lamott reflected that that was a lot like her experience with God. She longs to see and experience God’s full presence during difficult times, but she often receives just enough to get her through, just enough to sustain her hope. In a few minutes we’ll talk

about how that presence of God may come to us, but for now, just note that Paul wants hope for the Ephesians and for us.

And, he wants them to see “*the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.*” You’ll remember that part of our identity that Paul talked about earlier in the chapter is that we are adopted into God’s family. As such, we have a right to a great inheritance, which in this case isn’t experienced alone, but “among the saints.” Many scholars think Paul is referring here to the unity we have as fellow followers of Jesus, a theme he will develop more fully in the next chapter.

Some of you know that Bonnie and I are part of a small group that meets each Tuesday night for study and prayer and support. During the stay-at-home order, we have been meeting by Zoom. We have found this time of fellowship to be more important to us than ever, so much so that when I suggested that we do something different for a few weeks, several members strongly resisted the idea, saying that our support of one another is too important to set aside even for a short time! That’s part of our inheritance among the saints, too! Our fellowship with each other in Christ.

Finally, Paul wants us to see “*what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.*” Power. Paul says that God’s great power- the power that created the entire universe by the way- that power is “for us who believe.” Then he goes on

to talk more about this power. ²⁰*“God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”* (Eph. 1:20-23)

Police officer Jesse Hartman was engaged in a high-speed chase one night on the streets of Fremont, CA when something unexpected happened. He was driving the department’s only Tesla Model S patrol car at a high rate of speed, when he noticed that he only had a few miles of battery life left. That’s a serious problem when you’re driving a battery-powered car! Fortunately, the driver of the fleeing car crashed into some bushes and the chase ended, saving officer Hartman some very real embarrassment. You see, the car is supposed to be charged before each shift, and Officer Hartman had forgotten to check!

I wonder if some of us are running low on power at this particular time. We’re getting near the end of our natural reserves of good will and patience, or maybe we’ve already run out! The good news is that God wants to empower us to be his people so we can do his work in our families, neighborhoods, and our places of work. We need to avail

ourselves of this power! How? By plugging into those time-tested spiritual disciplines like prayer.

You can use Paul's prayer as a model, thanking God for his good gifts and then moving on to pray for others, as you remember God's priorities and plans in our world. Reading the Bible is another of those disciplines that can empower us. Why not read a chapter of Ephesians each day this week? It's not an easy book to preach, and becoming familiar with it will help you understand my sermons! Fellowship also gives us strength. A new Zoom small group is forming now. And I'm teaching a Zoom course about Christian ethics in a week or so. Opportunities for fellowship. Service is another spiritual discipline that empowers us. Look for one unselfish act you can do for someone else each day this week. And, finally, there is worship. You're off to a good start on that one, since you're tuned into this service! Keep up the good work, and look for other opportunities to worship God during the week.

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of

his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

(Eph. 1:17-19)