

Praying Towards Wholeness (Eph. 3:14-21)

Over the last couple of weeks we've been exploring ideas loosely gathered under the heading of "church rehab" as we consider what it means to be the church in a new season—a return from isolation and distance amid a culture changed by the pandemic recognizing that we are changed as well. We touched on ideas related to the forms of church in terms of how to best organize ourselves for a coming shift in how the church approaches ministry among ourselves and towards the community. We've looked at dynamics which define relationships within the church regardless of forms—and I trust these past two weeks have laid the foundation for conversations to follow that will help us work out how all of this applies to our congregation. Today, I want to lead your thought through this passage in Ephesians that teaches us how to pray for one another in this process. Because there is quite a bit for us to consider in this new season, our default response to information like this is to buckle down and figure out what to do. But the critical first step in all of this is to pray, for this congregation belongs to God, and we want to align ourselves with God's desire and intent so that God's purpose for each of us can be realized as we press ahead.

Ephesians is unique among the epistles in that instead of correcting problems, it profiles the high value God places on the church as the means of displaying God's glory in the world through Jesus Christ resident in the church by his Spirit. Ephesus was a center of commerce at the intersection of major trade routes. From Acts 19 we learn of a Jewish presence and synagogue, but there were also people practicing what we might call "dark arts," sorcery that dabbled with demons. Additionally, Ephesus was the guardian of the goddess Artemis, whose Temple was located there containing her image held to have fallen from heaven. Being part of the Roman Empire meant the presence of Emperor worship also rippled through its culture. From each of these strands of belief people became followers of Jesus finding themselves somewhat displaced among a pluralistic culture. It's not hard to imagine them wondering: where do we fit into the world? How do we fit in the world? Their faith in Christ would have pushed them towards the margins of their society—the cultural markers that defined one's sense of space in that time dissolved within the congregation, but where did that leave them in terms of their identity and to what end were they pointed in their collective self?

We could well be asking similar questions. We live in a pluralistic environment, somewhat displaced from cultural norms, and find ourselves increasingly marginalized within a society becoming more secular. We've noted that Christianity has a checkered reputation in our culture and the church's standing is slipping from what it once was. Faith is popularly characterized as fine for personal use but of little value in the public square. So as we ponder our place in the world and listen for the way forward, praying towards God's desire for the church to be fulfilled is a sensible starting point for whatever comes next. This portion of Ephesians provides such a guide that teaches us how to pray for one another and our collective self.

We begin praying that God would strengthen us with power through God's Spirit in our inner being. You see, this is always where God's work in us begins—at the core of our being, and the power for which we pray is the ability to participate with the Spirit who is moving us in the direction where our inner life matches that of Jesus. So part of that involves our self-understanding as a child of God, which we've covered previously, but still bears noting that this is our primary identity beyond all the labels and categories running rampant in our culture. It also involves affirming our self-worth—what is my value as a person, which is constantly under assault in a world that measures our worth by what we produce or contribute, or by how many followers we have on Instagram or YouTube. Bloomberg last month published a report that Amazon now uses algorithms in assessing employee performance citing that drivers, in particular, have been terminated by a bot for failing to measure up to performance standards. Imagine how self-worth is challenged when you're fired by a computer. Let the Spirit remind you in your inner being that you were worth dying for—Jesus bled and died to establish your worth as loved and desired by God regardless of all else. Emotional control is another aspect of inner work. By the power of the Spirit, we are not enslaved by our emotions, how we feel

towards ourselves or others, what we crave. Emotions are not in themselves problematic, we are created with them—they are terrific servants, but terrible masters. When they are allowed to rule our responses, we find ourselves becoming impulsive, critical, easily irritated or offended. Our likes overrule our loves; our impulses jeopardize our goals. They attach to thoughts or ideas—which is natural, but they become counter-productive when they subvert careful thought or creativity by negative attachment. Of course, that's sometimes helpful—we should have an aversion to robbing a bank, but this is the work of the Spirit, to cultivate wisdom in managing our emotion so that it's rightly applied. If you want a quick check on how this dimension of inner work is progressing in you, just assess your attitude while driving. How much emotional energy do we squander in protecting a piece of asphalt we occupy for a fraction of a second? On a more serious note, how much of the love we've been given in Christ do we withhold from others on the basis of our emotional response? Remember that love means willing and working towards the well-being of others. How often have we bottled up that love we've been freely given on the basis of dislike, or spite, or envy? Inner work isn't always easy, but it is necessary—and more often than we'd care to admit, we need grace to accomplish that work—the power of God—that enables you to do what you cannot do in your strength alone. Resolve is another piece of inner work. Determination. The ability to stay engaged, to see something through. In terms of faith, it's what Eugene Peterson described as "a long obedience in the same direction." You'll recall that obedience in scripture is another way of defining agreement with God. We pray for our resolve to follow Christ despite circumstances or setbacks—they will come, but so will strength to carry us through. Which doesn't mean we're meant to live a dreary life—there will be plenty of joy and delight as well, but our resolve is tested in the dark—we pray for grace to reach the light.

The inner work is where it starts, so that, as the passage tells us, Christ may dwell in our heart through faith. Meaning that Christ is at home in us—and that we're aware of this. He is not simply a guest we admit to our freshly polished living room on Sundays. He's there all the time, in every part of us, not just the parts we're willing for him to have. Furthermore, he's there as master of the house to whom we turn for direction—this is the place of the heart, it's the executive center of the person where decisions are made. Impulses and desires may come from the body, suggestions may come from our social circle, the mind informs our understanding inviting reasoning, but it's the heart that makes the choice. And the point of our prayer here is that we will make decisions on the basis of how they line up with the desire of the master. Naturally, the better we know him, the easier this will be—our confidence will grow, that's faith, and trust follows in the decisions made.

So then, as you are rooted in love—the result of the Spirit's inner work and Christ's indwelling presence—this is the soil that feeds your life in Christ, we pray for the ability to grasp the scope of Christ's love. It is all-encompassing, both within you and around you. There is nothing within you that cannot be touched by Christ's love—as deep as you think you have fallen, as far as you think you've gone, as tipped as you think your life has become—Christ's reach is sufficient to retrieve, to restore, to right so that you are whole, so that you are free from recrimination, so that you know whose you are and that this is good. By the same token your sight is lifted into the limitless horizon of Christ's reach in the world around you. There is no person, nor people, or problem that is beyond the care or reach of Christ. Now these may be beyond your personal capacity to bring ultimate resolution, but what you discover is that it doesn't depend entirely upon you. This is why we pray this way for one another, for you have the ability to address some piece of what Christ's love can impact, and another in Christ will step in to carry it on—and maybe it will take several others, but there are ample Christ followers to extend the love of Christ as each does what is theirs to do.

This leads us to know—and here this means to experience—this love, of Christ, that surpasses knowledge. It is one thing to dispassionately acquire information about the love of Christ, it's a whole other thing to tangibly experience it—the key is engaging in the expressions of Christ's love. Recently I landed on a Discovery Channel episode during shark week featuring William Shatner, who expressed the desire to overcome his deep-seated fear of sharks. So naturally, the experts recommended he swim with sharks, and not just baby sharks,

but Tiger sharks off the island of Bermuda. He assumed that he would be in a cage, but when he got there, they informed him that they were testing a new device to repel ambush predators, like Tiger sharks, who attack from behind. There was no cage—he, and others with him, would stand in front of magnetized barrier that would scramble the shark's receptors and divert them. He only had to pay attention to what was in front of him, and they assured him that this was doable with the devices they gave him. Now, it's one thing to have experts explain the science behind it—you can understand the design, you can even think it sensible and leave it at that, which does nothing to allay your fear. Shatner trusted the experts, got in a wetsuit, and descended to the barrier, which worked exactly as predicted. When they surfaced, he claimed his fear was gone. The point we take is this: just as Shatner had to engage in the setting firsthand to overcome his fear, we in Christ experience his love firsthand as we engage in its expression and effect.

When we pray like this for one another and for our congregation as a whole, we lay claim to the power of God for the purpose of becoming what God intends for us, and in that we fulfill our role, we find our place in the world. As that happens, we break out in worship and praise for God who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power, catch this, that is at work within us—this is not us standing by watching God work alone in creation—this is us as instruments through whom the power of God is released in the world to bring about outcomes in keeping with God's purpose and vision. Tom Wright describes us in this way as a mirror tipped at a 45 degree angle, where we reflect God's glory and purpose into the world, and where we also then reflect back the praise that comes to God as that is realized. Will you pray this prayer for yourself, for your sisters and brothers here, and for our congregation as a whole? As you do, we will experience God as never before, we'll see firsthand God's work, we'll discover outcomes beyond our imaginations, and we will worship together saying, "To God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations for ever and ever!" AMEN.