

**Ephesians III**  
**Ephesians 3:14-21****Pastor Wayne Peterson**  
**July 25/26, 2009**

*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.*

As we continue to make our way through an 8-week journey with Ephesians, the first three words of today's passage demand that we do a brief review. "For this reason..." today's passage begins. For what reason? What is the reason why Paul "bows his knees before the Father"? What reason has moved Paul to worship?

People may be moved to worship and praise God for a variety of reasons. Carl Boberg, the Swedish poet who wrote the hymn "How Great Thou Art" (#856), gives two reasons that he is moved to sing, "O God, how great thou art." In the first two stanzas he says that when he observes the glory of creation – the mountains, forests, streams, and wildlife – "then sings my soul...how great Thou art!" In the third stanza he contemplates the wonder of God's action in Christ: "But when I think that God, his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in, that on the cross my burden gladly bearing He bled and died to take away my sin." What does this knowledge move him to do? "Then sings my soul...how great Thou art!"

Paul says that something has moved him to bow his knees and worship. To find out what that something is, we have to go back to the passage we read last week to get the answer. In chapter two we read, "For Christ is our peace, who has made us both [Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians] one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility...that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of two, so making peace."

This is the reason Paul is compelled to fall on his knees in worship and praise of God. He has been talking about the tough problem of divisions within the church, walls that people have erected between themselves, specifically between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. When Ephesians was written, there were strained relations between these two groups. The Law God gave to Moses had served as a boundary line, or a wall, defining God's chosen people, so Jews and Gentiles (anyone who is not Jewish) had been clearly divided for centuries. This division had carried over into the Christian church -- the Gentile Christians were often made to feel inferior by the Jewish Christians because they were not part of Israel, God's chosen people. The Gentile Christians would counter that the Jewish Christians were putting more emphasis on their heritage than on their relationship with Christ – and the argument went back and forth.

Paul's key message in this letter is that Christ has "broken down the dividing wall of hostility" between Gentiles and Jews. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says that there are other walls that Christ has also brought down as well – "For there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female – you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) In Christ, all have access to God. Paul calls this a "mystery". When he uses the word "mystery" he does not mean something that is puzzling or difficult to understand. This mystery is not like a Sherlock Holmes novel, where if one simply pays attention to all the clues the mystery can be explained. Paul uses the word "mystery" to indicate something that is wonderful and totally unexpected – Gentiles, who once were aliens and outsiders to God's people, have now been brought near and built into God's people.

Are you familiar with the game "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon"? The basic premise of the game is that everyone who has acted in a movie can be connected to actor Kevin Bacon in six steps or less – for example, Robert Redford was in *All the President's Men* with Dustin Hoffman, who was in *Hook* with Julia Roberts, who was in *Steel Magnolias* with Sally Fields, who was in *Forrest Gump* with Tom Hanks, who was in *Apollo 13* with KEVIN BACON!

Paul here plays a similar type game to describe the unity of the church, the connection each of has with any other Christian, but for Paul there is only one degree of separation. The God-engineered unity of the church reminds Paul of creation – that as creator, God has made each human being – and therefore, each of us has a direct connection, one degree of separation, from every other human being. That's what Paul is getting at in verse 15 when he describes God as being the one "from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name." I was made by God, who also made you, so we're connected. The same is true of the church, says Paul. I was made part of the church by God's act in Christ, as were you, so we have unity in the church.

Paul doesn't say that God *will* break down the walls in the church some day or that God *ought* to heal our divisions. He announces that Christ *has already done this*. From the cross Christ reached out and embraced all, forgave all, loved all. It is an accomplished fact, a done deal.

What's not done yet is our comprehension of what Christ has done. We do not always live with the joy of this reality. So Paul prays for his readers – which includes you and me – that one day we will get it into our little heads and into our little lives just how great is the "breadth and length and height and depth" of the love of Christ. And when that happens, then we, like Paul, will be moved to worship – to bend our knees before God who has made all things new, all things one, even us.

Often when we come to worship, as we have this morning, we come as if none of this has happened – as if all the old boundaries, the old labels, the old divisions and distinctions are still in place. Someone has brought an old grudge from a long ago incident suffered at the hands of a relative, a grudge that has kept her away from family gatherings for twenty years. Someone else is seething, eaten up with resentment against one who was once a friend because that person succeeded in a way that he had not. Others are not angry or bitter, but have high walls erected in their minds that make them certain that that group of people can't be part of the church because they have a different understanding of the sacraments, and that group of people can't be part of the church because what is "normal" for them is different than what is "normal" for me, and that group of people can't be part of the church because they're on welfare, or have tattoos, or have family problems, or whatever criteria they come up with.

No wonder that sometimes our hymn singing is less than spirited, our praise a bit hollow, our prayers not too earnest. We're not yet ready to worship, caught up as we are in the narrow confines of the walls we construct. We've not yet caught the mystery and wonder of a God as large as the one whose love is so broad and long, high and deep, as the love of Christ. And so Paul's prayer for the original readers of his letter is still very relevant for us today --

*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.*

This next hymn makes this same point in poetry. Frederick Faber was a priest in the Roman Catholic Church in England in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote 150 hymns, three of which you might recognize: "My God, How Wonderful Thou Art", "Faith of Our Fathers", and this one, "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy." It's the third stanza of this hymn which most directly relates to our reading from Ephesians, so I took the liberty of printing the third stanza in the bulletin so we can read it before we sing the words:

For the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind;  
and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.  
But we make this love too narrow by false limits of our own;  
and we magnify its strictness with a zeal God will not own.

- Frederick W. Faber (1814-1863)

A large, all-embracing God deserves children of equally wide embrace.

Amen.