**Sermon for July 28, 2024 Ephesians 3:14-21 “The Best Pastoral Prayer Ever”** *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.*

By the time I preach this sermon, the Olympics should be well underway. And in a move that would leave the original Greeks speechless, this Olympics features at least one goat. We love the modern use of this word – Greatest Of All Time, GOAT. Simone Byles is the most popular contender for the title of GOAT in gymnastics, but there are others, many others, and today I would add to that list the Apostle Paul. When it comes to creating prayers that endure the centuries, he is the GOAT, the greatest of all time.

It was on the Greek island of Crete that I actually saw a goat – not that surprising, since there are many more goats than people on the island of Crete – but *this* goat, I am not kidding, was standing about ten feet off the ground on a thick, horizontal tree branch. Head and shoulders above everything around it, he reminded me of St. Paul. But that island also featured some remarkably dense humans, including one poor woman who asked our well-educated tour guide what road would be the best to drive from Crete to Athens. Since Crete is, well, *an island*, it was kind of a kooky thing to say, which also reminded me of St. Paul, who said enough nutty stuff to confuse the Church for all time. But despite that, the good stuff, the really good stuff, has endured too, and today we focus on the GOAT of pastoral prayers.

*I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.* Great opening, a timeless reminder that, whatever our current level of disaffection with one another, we are all family. Not just *like* family, but actually, factually, genetically, one people. I am cheered to know that despite skin color and cultural variance, a heart is a heart, and a lung is a lung; the *insides* of us humans, created by God, are all the same, despite our wildly varying externals. So, reminded of our essential oneness, the prayer continues like this: *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.* Here we go – God has gifts to give, abundant, inexhaustible gifts, and this great pastor prays that his listeners might receive one of the finer ones: inner strength, inner power, but so much more than just human grit or determination, inner strength that comes, not from *our* strivings, but from the Holy Spirit. Remember the Greek for that? *Sacra Pneuma*, sacred breath, the very breath of God, that gave and continues to give life to all creation, that is what St. Paul invokes for us. Inner power rooted and enabled by the very breath of God. Not too shabby!

But he is far from done; *I pray that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.* Christ – the Redeemer of the world, the Firstborn of Creation, all of that, living in our hearts because we invited him there through our faith, which, by the way, is also a gift from God. The indwelling breath of the Almighty and the essence of Christ, *in us*, as we are being rooted and grounded in love. Rooted, grounded, planted, nourished, sustained, blossoming, all in the rich soil of love. And this love is an unamended soil, the undiluted source in which we grow.

It is a lot to take in, which is probably why the Apostle continues thusly: *I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth.* He plays the oneness card again; this comprehensive understanding is not just for us but should be for all. And what he wants us to understand, to really, really *get*, is the dimensions of this life in which we are rooted and growing, the sheer grand scale of God’s gracious design. He knew that humans, potentially fabulous but too often frivolous, potentially magnificent but too often minimized, need the reminder, and often, of the bigness of God and God’s creation. Which always reminds me of the conundrum: how could a God so vast care about little old me? And the answer is right before us; God, as we understand, has no limit, no boundary, no perimeter. And as such, the *center* of God, the *heart* of the Almighty, can be literally anywhere. Are you held in the heart of God? YES! Am I right smack dab in the middle of God’s love? YES! Are the people who make you crazy in the heart of God too? YES!

There is one caveat, however: *I pray that you will come to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.* The caveat is this, that not everyone will choose the love of Christ. Many will choose the love of self or spouse or riches or power. Many will choose the love of knowledge itself, the scientific path, but the love of Christ, as St. Paul reminds us, *surpasses* knowledge. What’s the old saying, that science will laboriously climb the mountain only to discover that God was sitting up there the whole time? And why does Paul care that we come to know the love of Christ? Here is his boldest prayer yet, that by knowing this amazing love, we may be filled with all the fullness of God. Imagine that…full, beyond negativity, beyond want, beyond narrowness, beyond arrogance, beyond insecurity, beyond anxiety, filled right to the tippy-top with God. Wesley would call this becoming perfected in love. This filling, this process of seeking perfection, is the essential core of our Wesleyan religion. And St. Paul, formerly Jewish but now apparently United Methodist, wants that for each and every one of us.

He is winding it up, here comes the benediction: *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.* God, who can use the power at work within us – remember ? – the *Sacra Pneuma*, the indwelling Holy Breath, that power, **and** the invited presence of Christ, with *that* toolbox God can help us build virtually anything, abundantly more than we can ask or imagine. Too soon we accept our imagined limitations! Too easily we surrender our possibilities! Too readily we embrace the narrowness of the current worldview! And because of that liberating, world-shifting, life affirming work ethic, God *deserves* glory in the Church and in Christ to all generations, forever and ever. From the first human to the last, God is at work, assisting us to build a world of concord and justice, a world of sharing and mutual respect. And all of that is enshrined forever in this passage, the Greatest Pastoral Prayer of All Time. Amen.