

## Rooted and Grounded

This is one of my favorite passages from Ephesians. Paul is on his knees, praying for the people in the church he started in Ephesus.

And what a prayer. The phrases kind of soar off into the heavens with images of power and glory. In fact so much of the first half of the letter is like that...images of heavenly places...rivers of Christ's love flowing and the overflowing grace of God.

But the letter also has a more down to earth quality as well. Remember this is a letter to a real community...a church with real people. Like us, they were a community trying to learn how to live into this Christian identity they now claimed.

This passage is kind of a pivot point for the whole letter. The letter begins with this overflowing proclamation of God's grace. After this chapter, Paul dives into the specifics about how they are to live. Living an authentic Christian life and being an authentic Christian community has never been easy.

The Ephesians would need all the strengthening and power the Spirit could give them. That's why Paul is praying for them.

And frankly so do we. Living an authentic Christian life still isn't easy. We'll talk more about that in the next few weeks.

And being an authentic Christian community is never easy, either. But it seems especially hard right now.

I want to start our conversation towards the end of the passage – verses 20 and 21 are what's called a doxology. The prayer ends with these words of praise for God.

But what I want to focus on is the words Paul uses to describe God...God is the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.

We probably all would say we believe God is able to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine. But did you notice what it also said? It says God does that through the power at work *within us!*

God is doing something within us. God is able to accomplish far more *through us* than we can ask our imagine.

Notice that it's us and we, not me and I. This is about the community of the church. By the power of God who is working within us...Bethlehem and Zion Lutheran churches...God can accomplish more than we can ask or imagine.

So the question for this morning...what do we ask for our church? What do we imagine is possible?

We live in a culture that tells us the church is at best irrelevant and at worst, harmful. And we as the church we need to own how that has often been true. I'm talking now about the Church...capital C...not just our congregations. But as we go through the rest of Paul's letter over the next few weeks, we are challenged to think about what this all means for our congregations.

The church has too often been more like a club than a community dedicated to loving and serving God's world. The church has often been too focused on meeting the desires of its members and not enough with sharing the good news with those outside the walls. The church hasn't always done a great job welcoming strangers...especially strangers who we think are different from the norm.

The church has far too often supported practices and institutions that hurt people. We've too often been tempted to create a very un-Jesuy Jesus...a Jesus who loves us but not certain people or groups of people...the ones we don't like.

We as members of the community have too often been afraid to share our stories of faith, because we're afraid whomever we are talking to will reject it...and maybe reject us.

If we are honest with ourselves, how much do we imagine our church can do?

In many ways, we have bought what the culture tells us...that the church is not relevant...that it's sort of questionable how much it should or could do. Our imagination for the church can be pretty stunted.

But if we are to believe this line of Paul's letter, that doesn't seem to matter. Because we have a power within us that we keep forgetting about...it's God within us who can accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine.

And we do need to be able to ask and imagine far more than we have been. If anything, this pandemic and political unrest has forced us to ask and imagine far more than we have in the past. Going forward, we will need to continue to expand our imagination for how the church can be for the sake of a world in turmoil.

Here's just one example that I believe shows God's power to increase our imagination for the church. For years church leaders have talked about how the Church needs to make better use of the internet to reach people who may never show up. When the pandemic descended, and things shut down, church and worship leaders learned Zoom and You Tube and Facebook Live basically in a week. And their congregations bravely waded in and learned it too...some of you on landline phones!

I will tell you this...unless we had been forced to, I doubt I would still know about Zoom. And my You Tube channel would still be mainly empty. I just couldn't imagine where to even start. Many of us couldn't.

I wouldn't have worked as hard to reach out to the offline people in our community.

I believe everything we've done during the pandemic is how God, by the power at work within us, has enabled us to do more than I ever imagined 5 months ago.

But we need to continue to imagine forward. We will gather again one day. One day we will even be able to gather unmasked and we'll be able to sing and do communion inside and all the things we're used to.

But I also believe our imagination can't just take us back to exactly the way things were before. We need to trust that the power of Christ within us can accomplish more than we think.

I don't really know exactly what that will even mean...for one thing it will mean hanging on to what we've learned about using the internet and staying connected. But I think there's a lot more that we can take forward.

God will lead us to imagine more about what it means to be the church for the sake of the world outside our walls.

I have to confess it feels a bit daunting to me. But wherever imagination leads us, I need to be constantly reminded that this isn't something any of us need to conjure up on our own.

Going forward, it won't be just the imagination of myself and the councils. We need your imagination for what the church can be. Part of the power God uses is the power of community...the power of collective imagination.

It can seem daunting. The key comes in the prayer before that final doxology. Paul is praying for something God already wants to give to the Ephesians...and that God already is giving us.

God gives us the Holy Spirit to strengthen our inner being....to give us courage. Christ does dwell in our hearts through faith.

And we are being rooted and grounded in love. With all the saints...that is the whole community...we are being given the power to comprehend the vastness of God's love...it's through the community that God's imagination for us will be revealed.

So this is what I want to leave you with today. God has more planned for us than we can even begin to imagine right now. But God is also rooting us and grounding us, not only in Christ's love, but in the love of our community...this community of saints.

This community...our community... is a practice ground for loving one another. Because rooted and grounded in love for one another, we can love those folks out there we don't yet even know.

Even when we can't gather normally, we have been a community. Zoom has been for a lot of us a surprisingly good tool for community. But there are other ways...you can call up someone in the congregation whom you haven't talked to or seen.

Write a letter or email to someone. Start conversations with others in the congregation about what the church should be like going forward. What do you imagine for our church that you didn't before all this?

And remember, God is able, by the power of the Spirit within our hearts AND within our community, to do so much more than we can ever imagine. What a great promise!