

Filled with the Fullness of God

Martha C. Langford

Third Presbyterian Church, Rochester NY

26 July 2015

John 6:1-15, Ephesians 3:14-21

“I love you right up to the moon — and back.”¹

When my granddaughter was born, I gave a copy of “Guess How Much I Love You” to Nathan, her dad. It’s the kind of book that helps a dad tell his little nut brown hare, “I love you!” I imagine baby Rose, sitting with Nathan as he reads her this book and shares in the expansive love between father and child.

What does it mean to comprehend the fullness of a parent’s love for us? Of a father’s love for us?

This letter to the Ephesians fills its first two-and-a-half chapters exploring the expansive quality of God’s love and redeeming grace. We are assured that God’s plan for the fullness of time is to gather up all things in heaven and on earth in Jesus Christ. (EPH 1:10) *All things*.

We are assured that, in Jesus Christ, God gathers those who are aliens and strangers to the covenants of promise. We are promised that God breaks down the dividing walls of hostility and transforms all people into citizens and members of the household of God. (EPH 2:12, 14, 19) We are given to understand the mystery of Jesus Christ: that the outsiders (the Gentiles) have become heirs of the promise and members of the body of Christ. (EPH 3:6)

Yet, we also know that being told “you are loved” is very different from knowing in your heart of hearts that you are loved. So having shared his understanding of God’s purpose in Jesus Christ, Paul prayed that community would experience the expansive love of God in ways that move beyond head knowing and into heart understanding.

On bended knees, the prayer rises to the Father (the *pater*) from whom every family (*patria*) in heaven and on earth is named. *Every family*.

Having noted the power and the authority of the God, the prayer raises three petitions:

- First, Paul prayed that God will give the Ephesian church the power—through the indwelling Spirit—so that Christ might dwell in their hearts.
- Second, Paul prayed that this power would make the community strong enough to comprehend the love of Christ and come to know its infinite dimensions; its volume (the breadth and length and height) and its depth which is veiled in the mystery of God.
- Finally, Paul prayed for the desired outcome—a community filled with the fullness of God.

It would be easy listening to the English translation to hear these as petitions for individual strength and power, but the Greek uses the plural throughout.

In Texas translation the petitions are “that y’all may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit... that y’all may have the power to comprehend... that y’all may be filled with all the fullness of God...”

Noting the plural audience, Sally Brown writes, “The first revelation to be gleaned is that experiencing fellowship with God is tangled up in being bonded to each other... Such interdependence is hard work. Christians can be every bit as territorial and opinionated as anyone else. No wonder the apostolic prayer begins with a petition for the presence of the Trinity to move in with us. God forges us into communities, and then it takes nothing less than the power of the Trinity to keep us there.”²

Paul knew that the power of the triune God was needed to hold us together while we are being “rooted and grounded in love.”

This week, I got to watch baby Rose play with her first cousins. They met for the first time about a year ago when Rose was only two-months-old. This time she was able to join the play.

It was awesome; Rose at 15 months old is the smallest, Thatcher at 20 months is twice her size, and Colton at 7 is a true big brother. Yet, despite some toddler wobbles and fails, Rose ran after Thatcher and Colton with freedom and joy and laughter, secure in the presence of parents and family who love her.

Watching her I thought, “This, *this* is what it looks like to be rooted and grounded in love.”

Paul proclaimed a ministry of reconciliation, the breaking down of hostilities, the gathering in of all peoples. Yet, Paul and the early church community, for whom this prayer was lifted, knew very well the divisions between Jew and Gentile, between Christian and pagan; between citizen and resident alien.

Paul himself was a prisoner of the state for his part in spreading the gospel.

Cynthia Jarvis points out, “in the middle of petitions that seem to acknowledge the fact of our yet-to-be-realized reconciliation... Paul asserts the truth of our lives: We are rooted and grounded in love. What we ask has already been given. At issue, then, is our understanding, our comprehension, our knowledge of the nature of that love in which we already exist.”³

In prayer, Paul asks that the Ephesians might be “strong enough” to grasp the unknowable dimensions of God’s love in Jesus Christ; that they and we might come to understand *in our very being* the reconciling love of God. This rootedness, this groundedness in the love of God is characteristic of the “new life” offered to us in Jesus Christ.

The Presbyterian Confession of 1967 describes that “new life” this way:

The new life takes shape in a community in which people know that God loves and accepts them in spite of what they are. They therefore accept themselves and love others, knowing that no one has any ground on which to stand, except God's grace.

The new life does not release people from conflict with unbelief, pride, lust, and fear. They still have to struggle with disheartening difficulties and problems. Nevertheless, as they mature in love and faithfulness in their life with Christ, they live in freedom and good cheer, bearing witness on good days and evil days, confident that the new life is pleasing to God and helpful to others.⁴

Our evening news tells us that divisions are real, that hostilities are real, that hatred is real. Cynthia Jarvis notes, we live in a world where "divergent groups... each claim reconciliation with God as an exclusive reality of their particular family."⁵ Paul knew this reality too; yet, his prayer invited the Ephesians to live as those loved by God in Christ Jesus who reconciles all things in heaven and on earth and makes them whole.

Watching Rose dance with Thatcher and Colton, I wondered; "What might we dare to be and do, when we come to know—deep in our heart of hearts—that we are loved?"

Indeed, what might it look like to be filled with the fullness of God?

Friends, we gather, we worship, we feed the hungry, house the homeless, console the grieving, nurture children, live with joy and sorrow, we work toward the common good and despite our toddler wobbles and fails, we can be confident that these efforts are "pleasing to God and helpful to others."

We are freed to do our best, even when that best is not perfect or complete. Because "new life" is not about perfection or completion, it is about God. Paul gave assurances to the church in Ephesus (and to us as we listen in) that God—"by the power at work within us—is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."

Brain Peterson writes, "as a result of knowing the love of Christ, we carry into the world that love which is the embracing fullness of God in Christ. And so we are not simply filled 'with' God's fullness as something to make us feel satisfied and content, but we are filled for the goal of God's fullness in and for the world. In this way, we come to know the love which surpasses knowing..."⁶

We reflect God's love and so come to know God's love more thoroughly and in that understanding reshape the ways that we reflect God's love.

"Guess how much I love you," asks the little nut brown hare.

But we do not have to guess the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love for us, for we are invited to know it and to live it out as the fullness of God is poured into our hearts for the sake of the world.

Amen.

¹ McBratney, Sam. *Guess How Much I Love You*. Somerville: Candlewick, 1994. Print.

² Brown, Sally. "Commentary on Ephesians 3:14-21." *The Working Preacher: Preach This Week*. Web. July 2012.

³ Jarvis, Cynthia. "Ephesians 3:14-21, Expository Article." *Interpretation*. 45 no 3. July 1991. Print. 286.

⁴ *The Confession of 1967: Inclusive Language Text*. Louisville: Congregational Ministries Publishing. 2002. Print. 14.

⁵ Jarvis. 287.

⁶ Peterson, Brian. "Commentary on Ephesians 3:14-21." *The Working Preacher: Preach This Week*. Web. July 2015.