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The Amazing Community

Ephesians 3:14-21

Christians make up an amazing community. Comprising approximately 33% of the world's population, we come in every hue, speak every language, and are as diverse as the nations that make up our world.¹ We are as different as different can be, yet are united by the singular declaration that Jesus Christ is Lord. While at times we may act a little strange or seem a little odd, we are still a community called by God and united by faith.

We are the ones who embrace the stranger when the world says, "find a new home."

We are the ones who seek life for the wounded when the world would rather let die.

We are the ones who turn the other cheek when enemies take a strike.

We are the ones who speak truth to power when lies are the obvious way out.

While there are a million ways to live an easier life, we who are believers in Christ, have chosen the narrow path. We are the Christian community and we are called by God.

Just the other day, I was speaking with a woman from my church who felt God's leading to take in two women that could not find space in a shelter. One of the women was pregnant and I thought to myself, "what could lead someone to take in strangers who

¹ World Christian Database, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2006. Available online at <http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/p/christiantoday.htm>.

could add addition burden financially, emotionally, and maybe even physically.” Yet, the woman from my church was not thinking about burden. She was thinking about blessing. She said God had given her so much and she had no right to withhold from others what had been freely given to her.

Christians make up an amazing community. We are a people called by God to be different, unique, and set apart.

Yet sometimes we forget who we are.

Sometimes we get so caught up in the cycle of daily life that we forget why we're here.

We wake up, we go to work, we come home, we go to sleep.

Or, we wake up, we go to school, we do work, we go to sleep.

Somewhere between waking up and going to sleep, we become consumed with the cares of this world. Somewhere between waking and sleeping, we get caught up in bills, caught up in worries, caught up in people and issues, and problems, and stress that we literally forget who God called us to be.

And when we're not being caught up by the things of this world, sometimes we forget who we are because it's easier to forget.

It's easier to take the road most traveled than it is to walk alone on the narrow path.

(I mean, who really wants to walk alone?)

It's easier to go with the flow than it is to swim against the current of culture.

(I mean, who really wants to swim upstream?)

Sometimes it's easier to be in the world than it is to not be of the world. It's easier to tell a lie than it is to stand on truth, easier to do your thing than it is to do God's will, easier to focus on yourself than it is to focus on other people. Sometimes, it's easier to forget who God called us to be.

Maybe that's why the percentage of those who call themselves Christians in America has dropped more than 10% over the last ten years and continues to decline.² Maybe that's why young adults and youth who are growing up with a world full of choices are now choosing to be outside of the Body of Christ. Maybe because of our own case of forgotten identity, we've forgotten to tell our children who they are and as a result, we've forgotten to tell the world who God is.

You see, we are the amazing community for a reason. We are set apart by God so that we might show God to the world. We are the amazing community of Christ so that Christ might be seen through us and someone would come to know Jesus for themselves. We are Christians, not so that we can get more money or live an easy life, or hang out with the cool kids, or wear a fancy cross, or carry a heavy Bible. We are Christians so that our amazing God might use an amazing community to redeem the world that He loves so dearly.

² Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, 2009. Available online at http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_prac2.htm.

We can't afford to forget who we are because the world is crying out for God and God longs for the people of this world. The world is crying out for authentic people who are willing to pray on behalf of their friends. The world is crying out for a community that is not afraid to be inclusive. The world is crying out for a church that's not afraid to offer a soup kitchen twice a week or provide for those in need or to open their doors to people who look different. The world is crying out for us to be the amazing Christian community and we can't afford to forget who we are.

In our text this morning, Paul encourages the community in Ephesus through prayer. It seems that with all the cultural pressure to worship the goddess Artemis and with the merger of Jewish and Gentile Christians that this community needed to be reminded of who they were.

For them, it may have been easier to say nothing than it was to stand for something. Perhaps they got comfortable in their faith and forgot that believing in Christ meant waging on cultural complacency. They saw Paul as an extreme and maybe they were afraid to live for God because they didn't want to put their lives at risk like he did. But, Paul encourages them not to be discouraged because of his imprisonment or because of societal pressure or even because of their own differences.

Instead, he reminds them of who they are so that they might stand unwavering in their faith and others might see God.

In the same way, if we are to show God to the world and become more like the amazing community that God called us to be, we would do well to heed Paul's words to the Ephesians as our own. The first thing that Paul points out about the uniqueness of this community is that as Christians, we have strength to **bear the unbearable**. We have the strength to bear the unbearable.

In verse 16, Paul prays that the community might be strengthened with power through the Spirit of Christ in their inner beings. Notice, Paul does not pray that they have outward strength to build buildings or wage wars. He does not pray that they have outward strength in their numbers, their wealth, their weapons, or even their authority. No, Paul prays for inner strength.

Unlike physical strength that is obvious to the eye, inner strength is not often seen until the challenges come. Like a solution that is not activated until heat is applied, the power of God inside of each of us is activated when the heat of life's situations begin to rise. Paul knew that in these last days, the community of Christ would suffer violence and they needed to be strong on the inside to endure struggles for the sake of the call.

What makes an amazing Christian community is that fact that God has given us inner strength to bear what others think is unbearable. As believers, we have an inner strength that enables us to live through difficulties that may have killed someone else.

God gave Moses inner strength to lead the people when no one else could.

God gave Joseph inner strength to live through slavery and set his family free.

God gave Esther inner strength to risk her life for the sake of her people.

God gave Peter inner strength to move from failure to faith in God.

God gave Mary inner strength to anoint the Savior when others called her foolish.

But the Bible is not the only place where you'll find witnesses of the power God has given us on the inside.

The Salvation Army will tell you God gives inner strength to minister to the community.

Crisis Assistance will tell you God gives inner strength to provide for those in need.

My ancestors will tell you God gives inner strength to survive the middle passage.

Our Jewish friends will declare God gives strength to endure the Holocaust.

Those in Haiti and Chile will testify God gives strength to make it through disaster.

And if you don't believe them, just look around the room.

I believe we have witnesses today that will tell you God gives inner strength to survive chemotherapy, inner strength to overcome depression, inner strength to recover from addiction, inner strength to make it through divorce, inner strength to find a new job, inner strength to laugh with no money, inner strength to find hope in grief. Yes, God gives us strength to bear what others think is unbearable!!

Not only does the Christian community have strength to bear the unbearable, but we also have the power to **know the unknown**. In verses 17 through 19, Paul prays that "we, being rooted and grounded in love, may have the power together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love

that surpasses knowledge—that we might be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

Now, I admit that I struggled with this verse. Because in it, Paul prays that we would know what cannot be known. He prays that we would know a love that surpasses knowledge. So, how is it possible to know something if it cannot be known? Perhaps Paul is pleading that we would change our standard of knowing.

The world would assess what you know based on individual knowledge. But, Paul may be suggesting that we know collectively, which is a different way of knowing all together. Instead of leaning on your personal experience of God’s love, perhaps the true knowledge of God’s love comes when we lean on our collective experiences. In this way, we might know together, what cannot be known alone. Only when we can learn from the wealth of someone else’s story of God’s love can we have a glimpse of the width, length, breath, and depth of the love of God.

When my grandfather passed a few years ago, the family came together to reminisce on how grateful we were for the way he loved us all. My sister and I shared about how he used to buy us candy and make us greasy fried chicken bagged lunches. My dad and his siblings remembered stories of how he would push them in school and teach them how to care for the garden. My grandmother told stories of how he courted her when they first met and how he wooed her with his words. While each story was unique in its passion, only when they were together did we all understand how great my grandfather’s love really was.

As believers in Christ, we all have unique stories of God's love for us. Some of us remember how God's love gave us favor and granted the desires of our hearts. Others can share about how God's love kept us from dangers seen and unseen. Still others can tell about how God's love changed our lives and made us who we are today. While each of our stories can stand alone, we will only see the expanse of God's love when our stories come together.

That's why Paul prays that we would have this knowledge together with all the saints. Because while I may know a portion of God's love for myself, it's only when I link up with you that I understand how wide and long and high and deep God's love really is.

I may see God's love in the width of the horizon. You may see His love in the length of the sea.

I may see God's love in the height of the mountains. You may see God's love in the depth of the valley.

Since our perspectives and ethnicities may cause us to see God in different ways, it is only when we come together that we have an opportunity to know collectively what cannot be known alone!

Women may see God's love at work in the nurturing of a mother, men may see God's love at work in the protection of a father.

One generation may see God's love at work in the possibilities of the future, another generation may see God's love at work in the history of our past.

We may see God's love through the success of the American dream, but others can show us God's love through the struggles on foreign land.

We need each other to see the fullness of God's grace.

We need each other to see the fullness of God's mercy.

We need each other to see the fullness of God's glory.

We need each other to see the fullness God's love! And when we come together to see God's love, there's not stopping what we can do.

That leads me to my third point. God has given us the ability to **do the unthinkable**. As Paul closes his prayer, He says in verse 20, "Now unto Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us." When we come together to bear the unbearable and know the unknown, God gives us power to do as a community more than we could ever think or imagine on our own.

On this last day of Black History Month, we celebrate the collective accomplishments of people whom God used to do the unthinkable together.

We celebrate the Abolitionists and black leaders who lead slaves to freedom.

We celebrate the Freedom Riders who came together to challenge the status quo.

We celebrate the collective history of Americans who recognize the many stories that make us who we are.

And we celebrate an amazing God who is able through us together more than we could ever think or imagine on our own.

What would happen if communities of faith came together for the sake of justice for all?

What would happen if Christians believed in their God to bring healing to our wounded world?

What would happen if you and I understood the explosive power we have when we come together on one accord?

I believe we would see more churches like those in Charlotte who raised thousands of dollars for Haiti.

I believe that organizations like Crossroads would see their mission fulfilled with racial trust by 2015.

I believe we would see more businesses who are committed to providing more jobs.

I believe we would see less poverty when we come together to meet needs.

I know it may sound crazy, but I truly believe that through this amazing community, God is able to do through us more than we could ever think or imagine on our own.

And how will God do it? **By the power of Jesus Christ at work within us all.**

Jesus was the Only One who could **bear the unbearable** when He died on the cross.

Jesus was the Only One who **knew the unknown** because He was God's Only Son.

Jesus was the Only One who could **do the unthinkable** when He got up from the dead with all power in his hands! And because He lives, we can live!

Because He lives, we can show God's love!

Because He lives, we be a community!

Because He lives, we can come to the table to celebrate the One who lives and who is coming for us again!

What a privilege,

what an honor,

what an amazing community God has called us to be!

AMEN.