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Infinitely More than We can Ask or Imagine Ephesians 3:14-21 Fr. William Klock

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Eugene Peterson, one of my seminary professors, used to tell the story of a little Haitian girl named Addie. She was an orphan. When she was five, she was adopted by an American family. This man and woman travelled to Haiti to pick her up. As they walked toward the plane to go home, little Addie reach up and slipped her hands into the hands of these two strangers she'd never met before. In that moment, they became Mom and Dad. In that moment, this scared little girl put her fearless trust in these loving strangers.

That evening, back home, they all sat down to dinner. There were heaps of pork chops and mashed potatoes and Addie watched, wide-eyed, as everyone dug in—and particularly as her two teenaged brothers dug in and dug in and dug in—until there was nothing left. She'd never seen so much food before and she'd never seen people eat so much. And when it was gone, Addie became very quiet. Mom and Dad realized something was wrong. And it occurred to Mom that it was the disappearing food. This little girl had lived her whole life hungry. When food was gone, it was gone and it might be a day or more before there was more. And so she took Addie to the kitchen and she showed her the bread drawer, which was full of bread; and she showed her the refrigerator, which was full of milk and eggs and vegetables and meat; and she took her to the pantry and showed her bins full of potatoes and onion and shelves of canned goods. She showed Addie that no matter how much her hungry

teenage brothers ate, there would always be plenty of food and she would never go hungry again. And notice, that Mother didn't just tell Addie she'd never have to worry about going hungry again. She *showed* her. She named the meats in the fridge and the ice cream in the freezer; she let her handle the potatoes and the cans of soup. She gave Addie confidence and reason to trust.¹

Or as Paul has said to us in Ephesians 3, “confidence and access” (v. 12) to the “Messiah’s riches, riches no one could begin to count” (v. 8). None of it was ours—or the Ephesians’—by birth. We—and they—are gentiles. The promises of God, the Messiah, those things belonged to Israel. And yet, Paul has stressed over and over, the great mystery revealed in Jesus the Messiah is that through him, God has welcomed everyone—Jew and gentile alike—whoever believes—into the inheritance of Israel and into the vast riches of Israel’s God: forgiveness of sins and a promise of life, both for us, but also for the whole creation, one day to be renewed, made new, resurrected as Jesus has been, to be what God created it, created us to be in the beginning. The world set to rights and us, living forever in fellowship with God.

That is *good* news. And those gentile believers in Ephesus—and we—we’re captivated by that good news, by the promise, and we slip our grubby, sinful, idolatrous little hands into the hands of the Messiah and he washes us clean, he introduces us to his—now *our*—Father, and he begins to lead us home. Not on an airplane for a short little hop across the Caribbean, but a lot more like Israel being led through the wilderness for forty years—only this time the promised land is God’s future, his new creation. And maybe it’s because we didn’t see for ourselves the army of Pharaoh drowned in the sea, maybe it’s because we never experienced the

manna in the wilderness, but when the journey gets difficult—Paul knew that times of persecution were coming—but when the journey gets difficult, it’s easy to worry whether God will come through—whether there will be enough. It’s easy to hedge our bets and to compromise—trusting in the things of this world to see us through the hard times rather than trusting God and letting him lead us. It’s even easy to let go of his hand altogether. To just go back to Egypt—or in our case, to paganism, to the rule of the principalities and powers of the old wicked age. Things are familiar there. It might have been bad, but at least there was food. Paul knew these Christians would one day face uncertainty, he knew they’d be tempted to compromise their faith and their allegiance to the King, and he knew that if they did that, they’d fail to be the church Jesus and the Spirit had made them. They’d become just like the shabby and drab world around them instead of shining forth the Technicolor glory of the God who indwelt them and the wonders of his new creation. So knowing that, what does Paul do? Brothers and Sisters, he *prays* for them. Look at Ephesians 3:14: “Because of this,” he writes, “I am kneeling down before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. My prayer is this: that through the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with power, through his Spirit, in your inner being; that the Messiah may make his home in your hearts through faith; that you may be rooted and firmly founded in love; and that you may be fully able to grasp, with all the saints, the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the surpassing love of the Messiah, so that God may fill you with all his fullness.”

Maybe we should start at the end of the prayer—with the thing that Paul wants most for the Ephesians and for us—the thing that he’s praying all the other things will lead us to. He prays that God will fill us with all his fullness. Remember, that language of

¹ *Practice Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010, 159-60.

filling is temple language. That's what Paul's been talking about all this time. We are God's temple. The blood of Jesus has purified us from our idolatry and from the stain of sin and death so that God can come and dwell in us through his Spirit. And just as God's glory shone from the old temple on Mount Zion, revealing his presence with his people, just so God wants his glory to shine forth from us, from the church. We don't just proclaim the good news about renewal and new life and new creation and resurrection in Jesus. Brother and Sisters, we're to live it. We're to be the beginning of God's new creation in the midst of the old.

And Paul knows this won't be easy. It wasn't easy for Israel on her journey and neither will it be easy for us. So,, ack to verse 14: He gets on his knees and he prays. We'd do well to do the same, probably even the kneeling part.

You can pray sitting or standing or walking or riding a bike, but this got me to thinking about kneeling. It's not mandatory, but I wonder if it would do us well to kneel more often. Our tradition is to kneel when we pray in church and I know we don't do that here because we don't have kneelers and, even if we did, God bless the Presbyterians who made our pews a hundred and fifty years ago, but they made them so that only a child's feet can fit underneath them without major contortions. But maybe we need to kneel—at least in our private prayers—more often. I don't often read Eugene Peterson. I'm just not on his wavelength. To quote Eugene Peterson again: "While on my knees I cannot run away. I cannot assert myself. I place myself in a position of willed submission... On my knees I am no longer in a position to flex my muscles, strut or cower, hide in the shadows or show off on stage... I set my agenda aside for a time and become still, present to God."²

Prayer is the place where we come to the Father as adopted sons and daughters, reach up, and trustingly place our hands in his. And maybe it would do us good, when we pray, to put ourselves in a posture where that's all we can do, knowing just how prone we are to running away or cowering in fear or showing off. As we kneel, we empty ourselves, and with Paul, we pray that God will fill us up. Again, the point of our being filled is to shine forth God's glory, but what we're filled with to make that happen is God's love. In verse 15 Paul starts out appealing to God as Father—the one in whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. In verse 17, it's the love that fills our hearts, that is the root of the great tree, and the foundation of the temple itself. I expect, if he wanted to, Paul could just keep piling metaphor on metaphor to describe the riches of God's love, because he wants us to know that it's in knowing God's love that the church will find the power to be what God has called us to be. Would that we would remember that. How often have we put something else in the place of love? There are all sorts of things that are important to our being the church. There are all sorts of things that are even essential to being the church. But without love at the centre, without love as our taproot, without love as our foundation, we will never be the church that Jesus and the Spirit want us to be. Think of Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians. They were a church full of spiritual gifts. The people were doing amazing and astounding things in the name of Jesus. But Paul writes to them and says, "Without love, it's nothing. Without love, you might as well be a clanging cymbal, a bashing gong." You Canadians might say that the church in Corinth was a "gong show", because it wasn't built on love. Without love as the root and foundation, it's all for nought. Without love, there is no glory.

This is what Paul's getting at when he prays: "that through the riches of his

glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with power, through his Spirit, in your inner being." Paul wants us to see the riches of God's glory laid out for us. Like little Addie going to the kitchen to look in the refrigerator and the pantry, to see the bacon, to see the ice cream, to see that big bag of potatoes, to handle the cans of soup. To know those riches and to know that she has no reason to be afraid anymore. To know not just that she's been adopted into this family, but to know that its riches are now and fully her riches. This is what Paul wants for us. To see the riches of God's love, to experience the riches of God's Spirit, and to know that we belong to him. We are his people, his family, his sons and daughters—and to know it in our inner being, deep down, where it shapes who we know ourselves to be. Brothers and Sisters, to know that new creation is our inheritance.

And somehow, it's in this community called the church, this community that brings together everyone, people who are different, Jews and gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, slave and free—Canadian and American, native and immigrant, Conservative and New Democrat, young and old, homebody and adventurer, Star Wars and Star Trek, Coke and Pepsi, Ford and Chevy, introvert and extrovert—somehow in this community in which we're brought together, so different, and yet united in the Messiah, made one body, and our life together is dependent on these people so many of whom are so, so different from us, it's here that we begin to plumb the unplumbable height and depths of God's love.

Plumbing the heights and depths is an image that weaves its way from the Prophets all the way through to the end of the story in Revelation. Think of the Prophet Zechariah, who exhorted the people of Judah to rebuild the temple after they returned to Jerusalem from their Babylonian exile. But there was more to it than

² Ibid., 154.

the earthly temple. Zechariah had a vision in which a man was measuring the whole city and his measuring became a promise—a promise of a temple and a city even greater, one that no wall could contain, one in which the Lord would dwell with his people and become the wall himself. Ezekiel has a similar—and *much* longer—vision in which he measures the new temple—a new temple larger and greater and more awesome than anything that had ever stood on Mount Zion and that image from Ezekiel is then picked up by John in Revelation. To plumb the height and depth and width of God’s love is to know, to grow to understand God’s purposes for us as his new temple.

It’s interesting, because Paul has already written about this new temple as being full of the wisdom of God—like a storehouse for the nations, for new creation. And that’s something Job talks about: the wisdom of God, longer than the earth and broader than the sea. In Sirach, in the Apocrypha, the great sage envisions Wisdom herself, coming to live in the temple. He knew the world is not as it should be; he knew his people, Israel, were not as they should be; they needed God’s wisdom to set them to rights—and it would start, it would flow forth from the temple as a show of God’s glory. This is who God wants us to be, through the Messiah: people who know God’s wisdom, people who embody his new creation in the midst of the old. A people full of light and life in the midst of darkness and death. A people who will challenge the principalities and powers of the old age by our very existence. A people who will proclaim God’s glory to the ends of the earth.

Think again of Paul’s line of thought so far. One of the difficulties of peaching just a little piece or half a chapter of a letter like this week by week is that we lose sight of the bigger picture or bigger argument. But remember back to Chapter 1. I said last week, if we want to understand

Ephesians, just look at the “tens”. Chapter 1, verse 10, Paul stressed that it is—and always has been—God’s plan to unite heaven and earth. That’s how he created the cosmos to be in the first place: heaven and earth overlapping; he and humans living together; he, sharing his love and his life with us. And ever since we sinned and drove a wedge between ourselves and God, he’s been working to make us fit again for his presence. And so he’s sent, he’s given his Messiah—to bring it all back together, to embody new creation himself: God and man, heaven and earth united in one person. And then, in 1:23, Paul wrote that the church is the Messiah’s body and—it still amazes me to read it—the church is the fullness of the one who fills all in all. Remember, that language of filling and being full of God’s presence, that’s temple language. And then in 2:23, Paul told us that it’s through the gift of God’s Spirit who lives in us that God has begun to fulfil his promises to dwell with his people. The church as God’s temple is the signpost that points forward to God’s future when that wedge will be completely withdrawn and heaven and earth, God and man restored to each other.

And this is why Paul stresses, why he says it’s so essential the church be filled with God’s fullness. Our being the temple, our being filled with the presence and love and glory of God, is the witness to his promise to one day flood all of creation with the knowledge of his glory. I think Paul wants us to hear Isaiah 11 echoing in his words here. Remember we looked at Isaiah 11 back when we looked at Ephesians 1. That was Isaiah’s prophecy of the coming King. Under his wise rule the wolf and the lamb will lie down together at peace and the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. And so Paul prays that in our prayer, in our worship, in our life as the church, we may already know the reality of all this so that we might live, not just in

hope of God’s future, but as people actively pulling God’s future into the here and now.

Now, think again of little Addie. She’d never seen a refrigerator or a freezer or a pantry full of food. That kind of plenty was beyond her imagination. And that’s how God’s riches were for those gentile Ephesian believers. They knew that the world is not as it should be. We all know that in our bones. Like Addie surely knew that it’s not good to be hungry. But what’s the solution? And, if God is going to set things to rights, what will that even look like? We’ve had a glimpse. We’ve known the gift that God has given us in his son, who has given his life to purify us from our sins. We’ve known the gift of his Spirit, whom he’s poured into us to give us a taste of renewal and new creation and life together with him. And if we’ve listened to the story of God and his people we’ve heard of the garden, heard of the temple in which his presence once dwelled, we’ve heard of the exodus and Pharaoh’s water-logged chariots, and the manna in the wilderness. We’ve read John’s Revelation and had a glimpse of the end of the story, even if only in symbols and its full glory veiled. We’ve seen the kitchen and the pantry stocked with food. And yet that’s only the beginning. It’s only a hint of what’s to come. And so Paul prays again in verses 20 and 21: “To the one who is capable of doing far more than we can ask or imagine, granted the power which is working in us, to him be glory, in the church and in Messiah Jesus, to all generations, and to the ages of ages! Amen.”

Brothers and Sisters, God’s glory isn’t just to be revealed in the future. It’s here and it’s now and he means for it to be revealed in us, his church, in the same way he’s revealed it in Jesus. Whatever vision we have of the church, Brothers and Sisters, God’s vision for us is bigger and wider and deeper and higher and greater than we can ever ask or imagine. C. S. Lewis

once preached a now famous sermon on the “weight of glory”. That’s where he rebukes us saying that we are far too easily pleased. We’re like children, happily making mud pies in a slum, when we’ve been offered a grand holiday at the sea. “We are half-hearted creatures,” he says, “fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us.” And maybe we’ve progressed a bit in the church, but we’re all too often still obsessed with politics or denominational divisions or even otherwise good things like theology. But not love. It’s funny how we can centre ourselves even on all the good things that revolve around the love God, but somehow miss the need ourselves to be centred on that gospel love.

We need to be captivated by the gospel, by Jesus, by his cross and by his resurrection and by his ascension. We need to be captivated by the life of the Spirit into which we’ve been plunged. We need to be captivated by the promise of new creation, even though we’ll forever struggle to envision it this side of eternity. We need to be captivated by God’s glory, because he doesn’t just call us to be spectators to it. No. He’s called us into the story. He’s led us in our own exodus, from slavery to sin and death so that we—as fickle and confused and anxious as we often are—should live in the here and now, learning to be plumb the heights and depths of his love so that we might make his glory known in the earth. As inadequate as we may feel, we are his *poiema*, his workmanship, his grand and glorious piece of art, painted with the blood of his son and shining forth the glory of his Spirit.

This what he’s saved us for. To be the vanguard of new creation, making known his glory. And if that’s scary or overwhelming, Paul reminds us that the very one who has saved us is capable of doing infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. In other words, the fridge and the pantry are

full of more food than we can ever imagine. This is our God. So come to the Lord’s Table this morning and as you join with your brothers and sisters to eat the bread and drink the wine, be reminded of the infinite riches of love in our Father’s house. Look back to the cross and look forward to his promises, know the life of his Spirit, and in faith slip your hands into his and now that you are his son, you are his daughter, redeemed and renewed that you might know his love and shine forth his glory.

Let’s pray: Gracious Father, in our Collect today we acknowledged our sins and thanked you for the grace and mercy by which you have redeemed us and made us your own. Remind us always, we ask, of your great riches, that we might know the great height and depths and width of your unending love. And not just know your love, but as we know it, that we might live it—to love you and to love each other and in doing so, to shine forth your glory and to make you known in the world. Through Jesus our Lord we pray. Amen.