

Sermon for Sunday, October 2, 2022 – Trinity XVI
Ephesians 3:13-21

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. ¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith-- that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

We're familiar with suffering, aren't we? Paul is truly preaching to the choir as we contemplate the difficulties of living in this sinful world. Diseases and sicknesses, the ever-inflating dollar (and the corresponding loss of spending power), strife between us and our loved ones, war and bloodshed – our prayers every Sunday seem to cover the waterfront of the same problems over and over again. There seems to be no end to the trouble that we see in this life; it doesn't seem to be getting any better; in fact, we're told in the Scriptures that things are going to get much worse before they get any better. In the Last Days (in which we now live), the faith of many will grow cold; the church will decrease in its influence and scope; the evil inclinations of depraved men will become more and more disruptive and harmful.

However, Paul was no stranger to suffering and woe. He recounts all that he suffered for the Name of Christ which he bore during his many missionary journeys. Shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonments – all of these were visited upon the Apostle to the Gentiles. He knew what it was like to have those whom he considered friends and allies to abandon him, call him a heretic, and tip off the authorities with false charges and accusations. To top it off, he dealt with a continuing affliction that he called his “thorn in the flesh”, that despite repeated pleas from Paul to God to remove it from him, our Lord decided in His eternal wisdom to allow Paul to continue to have as his constant companion. Paul recounts all of these troubles, not to engender sympathy for himself, but to show the all-surpassing power of our heavenly Father to sustain him, even amidst odds that we might think were daunting and insurmountable.

But, the main point of this passage from Paul’s letter to the Ephesian Christians is not one of commiserating one another with war stories of survival and who can last the longest amid trial. Rather, Paul makes it his point to build his fellow Christians up with God’s response to the struggles of this life. He allows us to thrive, overcome, and declare His victory. He only allows testing and difficulty to afflict us in order to strengthen our faith in Him and His power over all things. He wants us to rely on Him for the ability to survive; He wants us to realize that we would be destroyed early on in this sojourn on earth if not for His love and His mercy. The only reason that we are not destroyed because of our lack of faith and our doubt is because of His forgiveness and His gracious provision. He loves us with a love that defies even our definition; nowhere else in all creation can we find anyone that possesses a deeper love for us His children than our Lord does for us. He sent His Son into the world to overcome the world, to fulfill the Law in our place, and to be our substitute.

Examples of His power and love and ability to overcome this world abound in our readings for this morning. In fact, the three readings are well summed up by the Epistle this day, when Paul tells us that we can “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge”, and that we may “be filled with all the

fullness of God.” Look at the example of the widow’s son and Elijah. Remember, this is just after God intervened in their lives (in the Old Testament reading from last week), and caused the jar of oil to continue to last, and the flour container to never run empty. Even though it seemed like they were going to die, God cause them to continue to live, through the ministrations of Elijah, the prophet. Just after this, God acted in their lives again. It seemed like God had given up on her – the son died, leaving her without any source of income, or much hope for the future – after all, a woman’s sustenance was through her husband, and in his absence, through any male children. Without either one of these, she was reduced to a life of begging for money, being dependent upon the generosity of others, or a hand-to-mouth existence. We might be tempted to think that He was allowing her to be “kicked when she was down”, having more happen to her than most of us would be prepared to endure

But, God wasn’t through acting in these folks’ lives – He caused Elijah to enter the picture, again, and enact His salvation, His love, and His tender nurture, in the life of the woman. Elijah prayed to God, and the son was spared from his untimely death. God didn’t leave the widow destitute, but provided for her needs – not just food and sustenance, but a son to be alive when he once was dead. She didn’t necessarily deserve this intervention on the part of God, but He acted just the same – His love was that strong, to overcome anything that would get in the way of His showing His compassion.

This narrative is told to us today for a couple of purposes. It’s told to remind us that God continually provides for us in ways that we don’t deserve or merit, and that He isn’t limited by our understanding in solving the problems in our lives. It’s told to remind us that we can trust in Him to provide – and even if He doesn’t do this in the way that we might expect, we still win in the long run, because the faith that we’re given by the Holy Spirit to believe in His steadfast love will also cause us to be included in His promise of heavenly glory when our lives on this sinful earth are over. Or, to put it more simply, we rely on Him for help, and realize that His help in this life pales in comparison with the hope of heaven that is about to be revealed.

Again, look at the example in the Gospel reading of the widow at Nain – similar story of the son of a widowed woman being taken from her, and the widow being without much in the way of support for the rest of her life. In this case, the son had been removed from the home, and was being taken to the cemetery, to be placed into the grave – she had more time between his death and God’s intervention. Jesus instructed the woman to not cry – even though He would later cry when He found out that Lazarus had died – the crying wasn’t a lack of faith in either case, it was the result of severe sorrow and mourning. Jesus not only showed His power, and His compassion, but His desire to act when it seemed as if there was nothing that could be done. In fact, He was the only One that could do anything at this point – the son wasn’t coming back, except for the command of the Savior for him to “get up.” He prefigured not only His own rising from the dead, but also the rising that He will enact in our lives when He takes us from this vale of tears to Himself in heaven – He will waken us from the sleep of temporal death to eternal life in heaven with Him.

These examples show us the love of God that is beyond our ability to estimate or find the boundaries of. It’s stronger than we can even imagine; it’s boundless enough to cover over the sins of the entire world; it’s strange enough to be beyond our understanding.

How should we look at trial and trouble in this life? We respond in faith, in hopeful expectation, in the knowledge that God Himself knows what is best for us and will enact it in our lives according to His good and perfect will. God ALWAYS keeps His promises – He never changes His mind; He never deviates from His Word. From the beginning, from the fall into sin, He has purposed to save us from our sins, and to remove the stain of sin from us, and restore us to Himself

He has acted in our midst to cause His plan of salvation to come about. He has given us His Word to lead and guide us, to show us His steadfast love in days of old, and His Word is powerful and causes faith to grow and take root and ground us in His love.

He gives us His gift of faith in Holy Baptism. We are washed in the font – our sins are cleansed from us, the Old Adam is in drowned and dies, and the new man arises to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. When we are wondering if God has really chosen us, if we are on our own to figure out a way to withstand the sinful world around us, we are reminded of our Baptism, where we were chosen by God, made part of His family, and given the gift of faith. Baptism is the day on which we were marked with the cross of Christ on the forehead and the heart, to make us set apart as part of Christ the Crucified. We are no longer children of wrath; rather, we are children of God.

He comes to us and allows us to eat the “bread of angels” in the Sacrament of the Altar. The same Blood of Christ that was shed on the cross of Calvary is taken into our mouths and selves through the participation of the Sacrament that Christ said we should continue to celebrate until He comes again on the Last Day. The same Body of Christ that died and rose again, on the cross and from the empty tomb, will give us life within us, as the words and promises of God declare. He doesn’t leave us doubting if we are part of the plan of salvation, because He beckons for us to come and eat, come and drink. Even though we are sinners, we are forgiven, strengthened and preserved in the true faith, unto life everlasting

We need to respond like the early disciples, when trial comes – after they had been beaten, imprisoned, threatened and banished by the religious and secular rulers, they rejoiced that they had been deemed worthy to suffer for the Name of Christ which they bore. Suffering isn’t desirable merely on its own; rather, it’s considered to be worth it because of the reason for which we are being punished – because we will not be silent, because we continue to preach and teach and proclaim the reason for the hope that lies within us. This is a little bit difficult for us to understand, since we live in a day and age that (so far) hasn’t stooped to the level of trying to silence our religious expression. However, this is NOT the case for everyone in this world; certainly, we aren’t promised to continue to enjoy this privilege forever! Being able to see the inherent blessing of suffering for the Name of Christ only comes with the

perspective to see that this world is only a warm-up act, only a foretaste of the feast to come in heaven. We're being made ready for the revealing of the perfect kingdom of God in heaven, where all suffering will cease, all inclination to sin will stop, and we will be completely and totally in the perfect presence of the Lamb in His kingdom which has no end.

Maybe forgotten in our consideration of this passage from Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus, was that he most likely was in prison himself while he was writing this epistle. Much like Philippians, Colossians and Philemon, Paul was bound hand and foot to a guard most of the day; yet, he was able to rejoice and use this imprisonment as an opportunity to proclaim the love of God in Christ Jesus. Was he insane? Hardly! He was, rather, possessed of a God-given power to see beyond his present situation, and rejoice in the coming heaven; he was given perspective to see that what is to come in heaven is much greater than that which we experience here on earth. When things are going swimmingly, we in our sinful natures tend to not think ahead to the world to come, because things are easy. It's only when we're enduring trials and punishments that we are given the ability to strain ahead for that which is greater, which is eternal life. When our mindset is changed from this world to the world to come, then and only then do we give thought to how we can have this hope, which is the love of God in Christ Jesus. Apart from this unconditional, unmerited favor, we'd have nothing to look forward to. But with the unmeasurable, inestimable compassion of our heavenly Father, through His Son, Jesus Christ, by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we can truly be assured that He is looking out for us, guiding us and leading us. Instead of being spiritually dead, like the widow's sons, we are alive forever in Christ, as the sons were when Elijah and Jesus acted on their behalf. Thanks be to God for His unprecedented and all-surpassing love and mercy. He has truly done everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.