



“Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat, Where Have You Been?”
Ephesians 3:14-21

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Richard Gibbons
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A few years ago, I received this email from a young dad in my congregation: Tonight, as I tucked my five-year-old son into bed, he wanted us to pray for the minister. “Which one?” I asked, to which he replied, “The very old one from Switzerland who wears a skirt sometimes. I like his preaching and I hope he doesn’t die.” After I composed myself, he led us in a heartfelt plea for your physical and spiritual well-being. I have to imagine that it warmed God’s heart.

When we engage with children, there are often moments that are wonderfully humorous and endearing. If a child is six, however, but continues to act like a two-year-old, or if a ten-year-old behaves like a six-year-old, we would have cause for concern.

In the passage from Ephesians 3, the Apostle Paul is praying for a young congregation who lived in the ancient city of Ephesus. He prays that they would be growing, developing, and maturing in their faith.

The population of the ancient city of Ephesus in the first century was around 250,000 people. Located in modern-day Turkey, the city had one of the great libraries of the known world; it also contained an amphitheater that could seat approximately 25,000 people, an enormous marketplace, and a Temple to Diana that was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Ephesus was a large, cosmopolitan city, with a busy port and important trade links.

Paul knew the city well. He lived and worked in Ephesus for three years and had a close relationship with this young and growing congregation.

In Ephesians 3, Paul is praying in a focused manner for the congregation. He prays that God would “strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” In essence, Paul longs for this young congregation to be growing, maturing, and developing in their faith. He asks that God would mold, shape, and fashion each individual into the person He is calling them to be. His prayer is that God would place His hand upon them and transform them by His love, so that they would become more Christ-like in their character, personality, and desires. Paul prays that in their interaction with family, friends, and people at work, they would actively and intentionally live out their faith amidst the demands, distractions, and messiness of everyday life. He prays that they would live lives of authenticity and credibility.

I imagine that when Paul’s original readers first received this letter, they were most eager to read it. It is similar to our receiving a text or an email from someone we hold in the highest regard. It is the kind of message you immediately want to read.

Across the street from where I live are two wee girls, Grey, age 13, and her sister Kate, age 9. One Saturday morning when Grey was 8, she came running over to see me at my mailbox. I asked her to help me pick up the mail as I waved at her sister who remained playing in her garden. Suddenly Grey exclaimed, "Wow! You know the queen?" I looked down she had a letter in her hand and saw printed in one corner "Inland Revenue," which is the UK's version of the IRS; in the other corner was a red stamp that said "Royal Mail." Grey assumed that because the letter had a crown and the words "Royal Mail," I was receiving a letter from Queen Elizabeth II.

Your Majesties, please forgive me. I did not have the heart to disappoint an eight-year-old. I just let her think I was a royal correspondent.

As we explore this remarkable passage of Scripture, let me encourage you to use your imagination. Read this passage as if you are sitting down to dinner with one of your closest friends, the kind of person you would share your deepest thoughts with. Someone you have a deep and intimate relationship with, one who looks you in the eye and says, "I am praying for you" and really means it. A friend who has your best interests at heart.

"He may strengthen you..." (Ephesians 3:14, 16)

Paul begins his prayer with, "For this reason I kneel before the Father." Why is that significant? It is significant because it tells you that this is no ordinary prayer. You see the phrase "I kneel," words that tell us a great deal. Someone like Paul, who has a Jewish background, would not normally kneel to pray. Visiting Jerusalem and the Western Wall, you are quickly aware that people stand to pray. For Paul, kneeling in prayer is a mark of intensity.

We naturally pray about the things that concern us or challenge us deeply. We tend to pray about decisions we face, situations at work, or members of our family. Yet none of those issues are what Paul is praying for. What is it that has moved Paul to this level of intensity?

Paul writes, "I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being." You may be saying, "Richard, this is exactly the kind of prayer I need someone to pray for me. The last couple of years have been difficult for me. My spouse has been struggling with dementia, and I don't know what to do about it. We have been married for over 45 years, and she no longer recognizes me. When our children visit us, she does not know who they are. This long, slow goodbye is so painful."

Or perhaps it is not dementia you are wrestling with, but a relationship with a good friend or a family member that has ruptured and turned sour; you don't know how to respond. Others of you here this morning may be struggling with tension and difficulties in your marriage; things have become so bad you hardly speak any more.

Perhaps you have a child or grandchild who was engaged to be married, but then things fell apart at the last minute. Their hopes and dreams turned to dust in their hands. Perhaps you are here this morning and long to start a family, but after an initial moment of rejoicing, you suffered a miscarriage, and you told no one. The pain has been debilitating and crushing.

You may be saying, "Richard, just between us, I have prayed and prayed and prayed. There is no obvious answer, and I don't know what else to do or where to turn next. I can't fix it. I don't know how to resolve it."

When difficult, painful, demanding situations emerge in our lives, I often wonder that God uses such circumstances to stretch us, refine us, mold us, shape us, and mature us.

Sometimes prayer is not about getting an answer to a challenging situation. Heartfelt, profound, dependent prayer forces us to dig deep, to persevere, to develop patience. Difficult days can force us to ask those powerful, personal, fearless, searching questions we would rather avoid. Sometimes God uses prayer to remind us that prayer is more about being and becoming than about getting—being patient, becoming Christ-like, being willing to persevere.

Let me explain. When you are focused on your challenging circumstances, God is focused on you. Shaping you. Changing you. Refining you. Drawing you into a more intimate, deeper, fuller, richer relationship with Him. Enabling you to become more Christ-like.

In the midst of it all, He holds you close and whispers to your soul, “It’s okay. I’ve got you.” Could it be that He is not asking us to have it all worked out, but rather to trust that He already has?

“To grasp how wide and long...” (Ephesians 3:18)

Then Paul takes his readers to another level. He is eager for them to understand exactly what he is saying when he prays that they will have the power to grasp “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, to know that love which surpasses all knowledge.”

When I was a child one of my favorite memories was learning nursery rhymes. I was fond of one particular rhyme. If you know it, please say it with me:

Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat, where have you been?
I’ve been to London to visit the Queen.
Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat what did you there?
I frightened a little mouse under her chair.

Several years ago, I heard a colleague refer to this nursery rhyme to make an important point. When it comes to our relationship with Christ, we can get so distracted with the demands and circumstances of life that we focus on the little things under the chair and forget to trust the One who sits on the throne.

Here Paul is reminding His readers that when we focus on the One who sits on the throne, we move to a fresh understanding and appreciation of He who is: infinite in love, eternal in nature, transcendent in majesty, yet immanent and knowable in grace.

Paul reminds his readers—and us—that the love of Christ is long enough to last throughout all eternity. Millennia cannot weary it. Denial, apathy, and betrayal cannot empty it of its power. It is high enough that infinity cannot encompass it, and deep enough that depravity can never exhaust it.

“Now to Him who is able...” (Ephesians 3:20-21)

This incredible torrent of devotion moves forward from theology to doxology when Paul writes, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

Back in September 2005 when our family lived in Inverness, in the Scottish Highlands, I was dropping my son off at the dentist for a checkup. No parking spots were available, so I drove to a nearby multi-story parking garage and then ran through the adjacent shopping center, up several flights of stairs, through the pedestrian precinct, and up three more flights of stairs. As I approached the dentist’s office, I collapsed with a heart attack. Two passersby put me in the recovery position, and one of the dentist’s assistants who had seen me collapse called out to the dentist to assist. After attempting mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, he placed a mask over my mouth and nose and attached it to a small bottle of oxygen.

When the paramedics arrived, they could not detect a pulse or heartbeat. Using a defibrillator, they were successful on the fourth attempt. I was stabilized and taken to Raigmore's Intensive Care Unit.

While I was lying in the street in Inverness, unable to breathe with no pulse, a congregation in Greenville, in South Carolina was praying for a new minister. God, in all of His love, touched me once again and gave me a second chance.

As we enter into a new week, please remember that when Paul writes, "Now to Him who is able..." we can trust these words. We can wholeheartedly place our confidence in Him.

Are you struggling and discouraged? Remember "He is able." Are you disappointed and hurt? He is able. Are you defeated and ashamed at your own sin? He is able. Are you struggling with fear, doubt, and uncertainty? He is able. Do you regret your past and believe God has given up on you? He is able.

There is no barrier too high, no valley too deep, no dream too extreme, and no challenge too great for Him. "He is able to do immeasurably more than all you can ask or imagine." You can trust Him!

