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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington  
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Sermon on Ephesians 3:14-21

Worship Theme:

**EPIPHANY MOMENTS: GOD DELIVERS MORE THAN WE ASK, NOT LESS**

It is easy for us to assume that if God says “no” to a request, we are getting less than we wanted. We need to have an epiphany moment, seeing the reality—that God always wants more for us than we want from him. So, when God says “no” to our request, we can be assured it is because he wants to give us more. God’s love for us is like that of a groom for his bride. His love for us exceeds all expectation and understanding. In that love, God always delivers more than we ask, not less.

Sermon Theme: “A Powerful Prayer for God’s People”

1. We Need What God Gives Us
2. God Can Always Do More

What do you pray for? Maybe some things come to mind rather quickly: good health for us and our families, financial stability, safety when traveling. Sometimes we pray very generic and common prayers for things practically everybody wants and needs, and other times we pray much more specifically, addressing challenges we or our loved ones are personally facing. But asking a question like “What do you pray for?” can also point out a big problem: we don’t pray. Granted, many people have designated prayer time each day, and God be praised if you do – it’s a wonderful thing! But many of us also hear this question and find ourselves being reminded that we don’t pray nearly as often as we should.

Maybe barriers are starting to go up in your mind: “But Pastor, I DO pray – many times each day!” Great! But how many are something besides a hastily mumbled word of thanks before digging into food or a bedtime prayer that is so routine you don’t even think about the words anymore? And even if we do pray at other times throughout the day, how many of them are prayers telling God what he should be doing differently to make our lives the way WE want them to be?

Oh yes, our prayer lives need help. I truly do give thanks to God for all of you who regularly spend time speaking to our Heavenly Father. But we also must admit that none of us can pray a single prayer without sin getting in the way. Satan is constantly trying to distract us during our time with God, whether we are reading and studying his Word, worshiping him, or praying. Excuses come along giving us “good” reasons why we shouldn’t bother praying anyway. Then we find ourselves either doubting that God is able to do what we asked or doubting that God would ever do something like that for someone like me. And sadly, instead of fighting against those sinful thoughts, we just nod along with them and say, “Yes, that all makes sense. I suppose I really shouldn’t bother with prayer anymore.”

I once heard a story about a conversation between Martin Luther and his friend and colleague, Philip Melanchthon. One day, Philip found Martin angrily muttering while kneeling in prayer. Philip asked him what the problem was. Martin

said, “I lack concentration. I cannot get through the Lord’s Prayer without getting distracted and hung up on one petition or another.” Philip replied, “Oh Martin, that’s simple! I can do it just by concentrating on the words of the prayer itself!” But Martin didn’t believe him, so he said, “Philip, I will bet my horse that you cannot get through the Lord’s Prayer without being distracted or diverged.” Philip eagerly got down on his knees, began the prayer, and after only a petition or two, asked, “Martin, is that with or without the saddle?”

Whether true or not, this humorous story makes a good point: prayer is a struggle for us. Time spent talking to God is rarely, if ever, without disruptions and distractions. The Apostle Paul knew that too. When we think of people who have suffered a great deal for the Christian faith, people like the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther are often high on the list. They knew the problems and pains of life in this world as well as anybody. Therefore, they also knew how important it is to “take it to the Lord in prayer”.

But that just adds one more thing to the to-do list, doesn’t it? As if we weren’t stressed out and busy enough, now we have to slow down and spend time praying too. When are we possibly going to fit that into our schedules?! If you and I are having that thought (and I admit I have) Paul’s words from Ephesians 3 are exactly what we need to hear – **A Powerful Prayer for God’s People**. Prayer is meant to be delightful, time for us to speak to God as confidently and comfortably as if we were talking to mom or dad. But because our sinfulness often clouds that beautiful truth, this delight needs to be discovered again. The delight of prayer, the delight of a perfect relationship with God our Father, the delight of everything God has given to us, and the endless delight God finds in each of us too!

*For this reason I kneel before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.* Paul begins by looking back and showing how everything he is about to say is the result of something else. Before he shares his **powerful prayer**, he explains why he is so eager to pray it: *through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.* [Eph. 3:6] Paul is so eager to pray for the believers because they are believers – both Jews and Gentiles together! Jesus did not come to save just one nation or tribe or people, and that message was being preached and proclaimed to many. Paul prayed that God would work his power and will in all of them. “*Every family in heaven and on earth*” is welcome in God’s family. Paul then prays for all God’s people to have three important things which **We All Need God to Give Us**:

First, he says: *I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.* Paul boldly and confidently asks God to dig deep into the wealth and abundance of the storehouse of his glory and from within it to generously pour out strength on his people. What a bold request!

But the request has a purpose: *so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.* There’s a lot happening here already, but Paul has only just begun. “Father in heaven, through the power of your Holy Spirit, give your people faith.” The only way faith comes to a person is by the power of the Holy Spirit working

through God's holy Word and sacraments, what we call "the means of grace." When someone is given that gift of faith, they are directly connected to Jesus and all the priceless eternal benefits and blessings he brings.

The language Paul uses is very intentional and shows this isn't just a one-time deal – it keeps on going! What a powerful comfort! One of the worst feelings is when it seems as if we're going through life alone, that no one is there to help us or keep us strong, not even God. Many moments in life may feel that way – a dreadful diagnosis, another month of unemployment, a horrible accident, the death of a loved one. We feel very alone in those moments, when the weight of the world is on our shoulders and we must continue to bear our burdens just hoping we'll make it. But this is where the beauty and delight of Paul's prayer comes in: we are never alone! *Christ DWELLS in our hearts through faith!* When the Holy Spirit gave us faith in Jesus as our only Savior, our hearts gained a new resident – the Savior himself! Jesus is always with us, wherever we go, whatever we endure; there is not a single moment of our lives that Jesus does not go through with us.

Next Paul says, "*And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.*" Wow! Rooted and established in love. Picture a big oak tree in the yard. You know it has been there a long time and, because it needs water and nutrients from the soil to stay alive and continue to grow, you also know it has a very extensive root system. Therefore, that tree isn't going anywhere anytime soon! That's us: rooted and established, not in soil or water, but in God's love!

Being rooted and established in God's love, Paul prays that we have power (together with all believers!) to GRASP that love. "Grasp" can mean hold onto something, but it can also mean to understand or comprehend something. Here it might be both! A prayer that we who have been given God's love will both keep a strong grip on it and spend so much time with it that we truly understand what a blessing his love is – *to know this love that surpasses knowledge!* The love of Christ is so *wide and long and high and deep* that no eye could ever see it and no mind could ever truly know the magnitude of it. Imagine as far as you can something reaching in every direction. And now understand that whatever you pictured is infinitely tiny and small compared to the love God has for you in Christ.

Then finally, Paul prays *that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.* As if those other things weren't enough, Paul boldly asks God to pour all the fullness of himself into us and our lives. Maybe we're thinking, "What does that even mean?! How can we understand being filled with all the fullness of GOD??" It defies words and is far beyond our ability to comprehend. God is already always beyond our understanding because he is so great; yet because of him we also get to have a life overflowing with peace because God himself is in it.

**What A Powerful Prayer for God's People.** When we began today, perhaps we were overwhelmed by stresses and burdens of life, wondering how we can ever find enough time in our day to pray to God on top of everything else we need to do. Now we're overwhelmed the other way – after hearing how much God

has done and continues to do for us, how can we do anything EXCEPT pray?! Obviously the demands on our time have not gone away, but the stress of finding time to pray does go away when we remember where the power of prayer comes from. The power and strength doesn't come from the one saying the prayer; it comes from the One who always hears it. And he graciously invites us to speak to him at any time about anything.

Maybe you noticed something else about Paul's prayer though – they are all things we already have! We do have faith in Jesus, we do know the love of Christ, and we are filled with the fullness of God! This is the best and most amazing part: even when he has already generously given all these things to us, **God Can Always Do More.** God can give more, strengthen more, love more. More than what? *More than all we ask or imagine.*

We know we don't pray as much as we could and that we don't ask for nearly as many things from God as we can, saying "This is too unimportant for God" or "God doesn't have time to listen to someone like me" or "this is too big of a request – I don't deserve it, so I know God won't give it!" But don't miss Paul's confident declaration: God is able to do *more than we ask*. Whatever we ask (or don't ask, even though we could!), **God can always do more.** Whatever we imagine, **God can always do more.** And whether he chooses what we asked, or gives something else, God's choice is always best.

Why is he so generous to us? Because that is what his love does: it perfectly provides for us, both now and in eternity. When our lives were nothing but sin, God's love sent his Son into the world to be our sufficient Savior, who lived, died, and rose again to take every last one of those sins away forever. Now God looks at you and me and is endlessly pleased because of what Jesus has made us. We are his children, his holy people, who will live with our Father in Heaven forever.

So we marvel in amazement at the goodness of God and gladly take every opportunity to pray, thanking God for his generosity and continuing what Paul began in Ephesians 3 as we **Pray this Powerful Prayer for God's People**, both for ourselves and for all the rest of God's people in this world, *that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen us with power through his Spirit in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. And that we, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,<sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. That's always worth praying! Pray it with all boldness and confidence as we join with Paul and all believers across time and history to endlessly praise the One *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!**

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.