Stuck In A Rut

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 3:14-21

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Sometimes, I pray with great enthusiasm. Sometimes, I don’t! My prayers seemingly bounce off the ceiling and fall flat.

There are times when I find myself going through the motions of prayer. I pray the same words and repeat the identical well-worn phrases. I pray for the same people day after day but nothing seems to change in them.

Sometimes, I feel as though I am stuck in a spiritual rut. I am almost embarrassed to admit this to you. Yet I know I am in good company to admit my struggles with prayer. Mother Theresa expressed in a collection of private letters her struggles to stay connected to God through prayer. The 16th century Christian mystic, St. John of the Cross described his struggles in a poem titled appropriately--The Dark Night of the Soul.

Chris and I spent considerable time on our nation’s highways last week. On Monday, we returned home from Boston where I participated in a seminary board meeting. On Wednesday, we drove to Ohio to visit my ailing father. I get cranky on the interstate. Overly aggressive drivers annoy me, especially when they ride my bumper and flash their lights. Is it just my imagination or do a disproportionate number of aggressive driver’s hail from NJ or NY? Highway driving puts me in a bad frame of mind.

We find ourselves today in the third chapter of Ephesians. We are focusing on identity and purpose—“Who am I?” and “Why am I here?” The first three chapters
of Ephesians focus on right belief and the last three conclude with right behavior. Right belief leads to right behavior.

Paul concludes Ephesians 3 with a prayer. This prayer came at just the right time in my life to deliver me out of my spiritual funk.

This prayer breaks neatly into two primary prayer requests. First, Paul prays for the strength of Christ’s power to dwell in his readers. Second, he prays for the fullness of Christ love to live in them.

This sermon is for any of you who find yourself in a spiritual rut. If your faith is at a standstill, this sermon has you in mind.

First, Paul prays that these believers in Ephesus would know the strength of Christ’s power. He prays in verses 16-17, “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”

Paul references all three members of the Trinity in these two verses. The pronoun “He” refers back to God the Father mentioned earlier in the introduction of the prayer. I have highlighted the other two members in bold print: “Spirit” and “Christ.” All three members of the Trinity participate in strengthening us with spiritual power.
Two other phrases are worth highlighting here: “inner being” and “dwell.” In my role as pastor, I receive a considerable number of requests to intercede in prayer for people. Nine out of every ten requests I receive involve prayer for physical healing. Certainly, God cares about our physical well-being yet I receive far fewer requests to pray for people with mental anguish or in emotional distress.

Paul’s prayer for inner strength is a needed corrective, given our preoccupation with the outer person. We need Christ’s strength in the interior of our lives—to hold up under the weight of pain and hardship.

Paul prays for spiritual power in the interior of our lives so that (note the purpose clause) Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. Dwell in the Greek is a word commonly used for first century home life. Christ came to make his home in our hearts. He is not establishing temporary residence but an enduring home in our hearts.

The second prayer request is a prayer for God to fill us the fullness of Christ. Look at verses 17-19. “I pray that you, 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 and to know the love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

Paul utilizes two metaphors in praying for these believers in Ephesus. “Rooted” functions as a botanical
metaphor. Paul prays for God to plant these believers deep in the soil of God’s love. “Established” acts as an architectural metaphor to convey the idea that God’s love serves the foundation upon which we build our lives. Paul prays for deep roots and a firm foundation in God’s love.

The four dimensions Paul mentions here—wide and long, high and deep to express the totality of God’s love. God’s love is wide enough to extend to everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. God’s love is long enough to last for eternity. God’s love is high, higher than any other cosmic power. Paul writes in the first chapter of Ephesians that Christ’s reign is “far above every rule and authority, power and authority” (1.23). God’s love is deep enough to extend to the depths and cover every sin. Test the lengths of God’s love. Plumb its depths. Experience its breadth and rise to its heights.

Paul concludes his prayer with a fitting doxology in verses 20-21, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine, according to the power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations, forever and ever. Amen”.

“Immeasurably more” is one word in the original Greek of Paul’s letter. Paul creates a new word from two adverbs to form a “super-superlative.” God cannot only do more than we can ask or imagine; he can do “immeasurably more.” There is no limit to what God can do.
So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Here is my suggestion. Pray Ephesians 3.17-19 every day this week. Center each day in prayer for Christ’s power and Christ’s love. Change the pronoun “you” from plural to singular tense. Lord, I pray for the inner strength of your power in my life today. Plant me deep in the soil of your love. Give me your firm foundation. Fill me to capacity with your love.

Take the next step and pray this prayer for other people who come to mind this week. Pray this same prayer for your family, your friends, your classmates, officemates and your spiritual friends at church. Pray that they would know the strength of Christ’s power and the fullness of his love in their lives this week.

Let me take this prayer a step further. I reduced this prayer to a single sentence prayer to carry around with me this past week, “Lord, strengthen me with your power and fill me with your love.” Pray this prayer as you drive to work or walk the halls care for children. Look for little fragments in your day to pray this prayer. If you find that this sentence prayer as too much to hold in your head, reduce it even further, “Lord, fill me with your power and love.”

If you are new to the practice of prayer, I have a few suggestions. Pray in a manner, that suits your personality and temperament. You do not need to pray with your hands folded and eyes closed. Pray as you go with eyes open. Pray aloud to engage your senses. I like to pray on the
elliptical machine while exercising. I was talking to someone recently who likes to take prayer walks in nature.

Pray with other people. Something dynamic happens when God’s people come together in prayer. Jesus said, “Wherever two or three people gather together in my name, there I am with them” (Mt. 18.20). There are people eager to pray with you following this service. They will pray for the Christ’s strength and the fullness of his love for you. You can bring any concern on your heart and they will pray for you.

As you are listening to this sermon today, you may have come to the awareness that you know intellectually that God loves you and Christ’s power is available to you but you don’t know it in the depth of your heart and soul. If this describes your situation, you may want to reach out to someone connected to our Renewing Prayer Ministry. They can join with you in prayer so you can know in a firsthand, experiential sense of Christ’s love and power.

Someone asked me last week what I do when my mind wanders in prayer. I advised this person to lean into their wanderings. Pray about the people or situations that come to mind when your mind wanders. Your wanderings may tell you what really concerns you that you can bring to the Lord in prayer.

If you are new to the practice of prayer, I would suggest you adopt the practice of praying one Psalm each day. When I decided to get serious about prayer, the Psalms
became my lifeline. You may be familiar with Psalm 23. There are 150 such prayers in the Psalms, enough to supply you with a half years’ worth of time-honored prayers. One of my discoveries about praying the Psalms is that the people who composed these prayers prayed about everything. They brought their anger and rage against their enemies to God in prayer. Consider Psalm 109—“May his days be few, may a creditor seize all he has and no one extend kindness to him. May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow.” Can you really pray this way to God? The Psalmist prayed this way. Notice, he doesn’t act on his prayer. He leaves it to God to sort out.

The Psalmists also feel free to voice their disappointment with God. Read Psalm 13—“How long, Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"

Our prayers are much too sanitized. We pray “stained glass window prayers”. Formal prayers are appropriate for corporate gatherings of God’s people. When we are alone with God, we can pray more specifically for things that vex our souls. You can bring your whole self to God in prayer. You can bring your disappointments and heartache to God in prayer. If you doubt what I am telling you, invest in the practice of reading the Psalms.
The only way I know to get out of a spiritual rut is to pray your way out. Take the next step in prayer this week. If you don’t pray, begin the practice. If you pray irregularly, become more disciplined about the habit of daily prayer. Pray every day this week, “Lord, strengthen me with your power and fill me with your love.”