

"The Power at Work Within and Among Us" 2016
Eph. 3:14-21, 4:1-6 1 Cor. 1:10-13, 3:5-7, 9-10, 16-17

The author Philip Yancey, tells a story about a homeless vagrant who manages to survive in an alley behind a fish market. Though he hates the awful smells and the nasty filth, at least no one roasts or hassles him there, so there he stays. He sorts through the dumpsters in the back of nearby restaurants, and finds left over bits of meals and uneaten bread to eat. Somehow he survives, amid the stench of putrid garbage and rats. One morning under rotting fish entrails he finds a soggy lottery ticket, which he wipes off and tucks away in his shirt pocket. Sometime later, passing by a news stand, he remembers the lottery ticket, takes it out and compares it with the numbers on the front page.

It can't be --- wiping his eyes he checks again disbelieving, for things like that just don't happen to him, unwashed homeless bums simply don't win the lottery. But its true, and he'll never have to go without again, he will receive \$ 243,000 a year for the next twenty years. Still unshaven, unbathed and still in his pungent old rags, he is dazed, squinting into the glare of TV lights as a young reporter pushes a microphone his way and asks, "So how do you feel?" No one has cared or asked him that question for a very long time. He feels like a man who has been to the edge of starvation and back again; who is just now beginning to grasp the idea that he will never have to feel that hunger again.

Grace is something like that. It comes freely to people who need it, to those who can't earn it and who don't deserve it... and the light of God's grace and desire to bless, has the power to change our perspective on everything. I believe we spend a lifetime finding out what it means that God actually does love us without limit or boundary. **We spend our lives exploring the many facets of God's grace, and yet it's always more than we can fully understand or explain.** On the road to Damascus God's grace changed everything for Saul. And that grace spills over in the letters of the Apostle Paul. He begins his letter to the Christians of Ephesus, by describing what God has accomplished through Jesus Christ, and then with great passion, joy and excitement he begins to explore the implications of that grace... **the incredible power of the Gospel to transform everything ... and that if they realized the astonishing depth of God's love, that blessing would drive and inspire every thought, every aspect and detail of their lives.**

As Paul contemplates God's gracious love and abundant blessings, his prayer flows with grace in a **powerful crescendo of hope**, and rushing cascade of fervent joy and wonder.
vs. 18-19

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

"that you may be filled with all the fullness of God"

is about sacramental moments in the life of a Christian, when the power and presence of the Holy Spirit blesses and fills us... but Paul's point here is more than just the Spirit in-dwelling every believer. **The gift and blessing here is something far more and even better.** All through these texts today, each time Paul uses the word, "you", in the Greek, it is always the plural form of the pronoun, **intending to emphasize the communal nature of our faith...** meaning that, this indwelling by the Spirit is not just an individual thing, **but when believers are gathered something incredibly powerful & wonderful happens... just as** Jesus explained and promised in Matthew 18:20

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

When we gather as the people of God, the Church of Jesus Christ, it's more than just a group of individual members. Paul writes about that grace in vs. 19, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God, meaning that in living out our faith together **we become the dwelling place of the Lord.**

In the Old Testament, the book of Exodus and 1st Chronicles, it describes God's glory and presence filling the tabernacle, and later, the fullness of God filling the temple Solomon built. Drawing on those Old Testament images, the Apostle Paul writes,

1 Corinthians 3:16, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 2:21-22

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

... For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ... In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

As a young Christian I remember those passages being taught as Scriptural prohibition against smoking, drinking, drugs, sex or eating too many tacos. **But that misses the full richness and depth of what Paul intends, for his point is far more than just our individual morality.**

In these passages, the Apostle is not suggesting that individual Christians become **little temples of God**, but that **together** God's grace extends even further **we become a container suitable for God's presence.** Paul is saying to the whole church in Corinth and in Ephesus "**surely you know that all of you are a temple, and that→ God's Spirit dwells among you, all of you together.**"

Paul would never say that faith is entirely private and personal, or that we can be Christians without being connected to others. In these letters, Paul really deals with just one major issue. Those early Christian communities were being torn apart with conflicts and terribly destructive disunity.

Paul is teaching that **when we gather as Christians, something special can happen among us as the body of Christ**, for when **combined, we become God's temple ... we are a place, a body of God's presence and grace.** It is the indwelling and presence of God **that makes us a church.** Paul is describing a critical distinction between **having** a church building and actually **being** a church. **Mortar and bricks make up this church building, but it's the people who have committed to God and to each other who make this a church body and who in fact, are the Church.**

Together, by grace and faith we are and are becoming the Church. Together, we are the temple, the dwelling place of God, **the place where Christians are made, nurtured and grown, called and equipped to love, worship and serve the Lord. Together, we become something far greater than just our own selves.**

During high school, our Presbyterian church put together a team so we could play in our local church softball league. We practiced together a couple of times and then decided which positions we'd each play ... and we were ready for the season. We played hard, but didn't win any of our games that first year, but we had fun and didn't worry about ending up in last place.

The next summer we played in that same church league again, and actually managed to do a little better... well, we tied with the Methodists once, and the Episcopalians forfeited one time when they didn't have enough players show up.

The next year, a former professional baseball player had joined the church and we got him to coach and play on our softball team. And as it turns out, it made a huge difference, having a guy on our team who had played in the World Series.

As our new coach, he taught us how to play our positions well, and went on to explain and constantly stress how each position was needed and contributed to the team's winning strategy.

He was also real big on how each team member was responsible to support and encourage each of the other team members. The whole atmosphere & attitude of the team changed dramatically, and we started winning games, almost all of them that summer. Our team standing moved from last place to first place, and over the next couple of years we got used to winning, and became the hot team of our local softball league.

But then he accepted a job coaching baseball at a large university, and moved away. We expected that without him, our team would stink again, but actually, **we continued to win most of our games.**

As it turns out, we didn't need a superstar to win. We just needed to play well together as a team, with each player doing their best in their position... for together we were better than our combined individual talents... our sum was far greater than its individual parts.

No one player could win the game on their own, but we all had unique and needed skills and abilities, that functioned remarkably well when we cooperated ... **as a team bringing out the best in all the players, for when we focused on working together as a team victory and other significant things happened and I'm pretty sure that churches and church members are also something like that, or at least that's how God intends for us to be.**

But the truth is, among the Christians in Corinth, there were serious problems of disunity and divisiveness, specifically some were focused on particular teachers,... and Paul's point was the same as my church softball team learned... **it's not about the gifts and abilities of any one individual, but each team member doing their best in their position, trying to grow and play better ball together as a team.** So Paul writes,
vs. 5-8

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

We do make an individual decision to receive by faith God's gracious love through Jesus Christ. Then, by the Holy Spirit in us and influencing us our faith and living relationship with God grows and deepens as we live, worship and serve within a church family, a community of faith and grace... **whose focus remains on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.** Charles Spurgeon once pointed out in one of his sermons, that if 100 pianos were all tuned to the same tuning-fork, they would also be in tune with each other. **So it is for members of the Church, if we all remain focused, in tune with our Lord Jesus Christ.** In welcoming new members today, they made some vows and promises, & we have made some vows and promises before God and each other.

Membership is a statement about our values and priorities, accountability, for others to helps us in our walk of faith, and for us to be a blessing and encouragement to others. Membership is a commitment to discover and develop our gifts, and to deepen our faith through our fellowship and service, to make a positive difference in this world and be a part of God' grace changing and healing lives... **and we do that together as a faithful community of God's grace.**

So as we read in Hebrews 10:23-25

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.