

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. 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. And 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 this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

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! Am

Sermon on Ephesians 3:19
CCRC, 12 September 2021
"THE FULL LIFE"

Dear Friends of God,

I am your new Pastor – Communities and Missions. It's a new position, especially the Mission part. I've been getting oriented, learning how Community CRC does things, who does them and what we want to see happen in the future. You've called me to help this congregation focus on developing the 12 communities we divide ourselves into and on the mission of this congregation, especially the local mission.

I'm not going to get into the details of how we will do that together. That's for another day. Today I want to tell you about my deep hope for this congregation. As I step into the role of Pastor – Communities and Missions here at Community CRC, I've been praying and asking God "What do these people need?" The answer I get isn't in terms of what kind of leadership or programs or strategies we need. It has to do with what is the highest and best gift God could give us.

I know that many of us are just sick and tired of COVID and the losses and changes it has caused. Stay home. Be safe. Keep your distance. Don't go out. Even if you don't get COVID, you are still affected by the malaise it brings. Fear of getting sick. Worry about keeping distances. The grief that comes with all the losses we've had in relationships—not being able to visit, to travel, to hold grandchildren or parents. The depression and anxiety are real. The lethargy and mental fog are real. We need healing and comfort.

I know we need spiritual tools to cope with a world that seems to be changing all around us. There seems to be so much polarization in society, so much anger, increasing violence. Someone threw rocks and the Prime Minister this week. How do we offer an alternative to all that, one that is grounded in our Christian faith?

I am drawn to Paul's prayer for the Ephesians. The book of Ephesians is my favourite book of the Bible. Half of it lays out Christian doctrine and the other half lays out how to live out that Christian doctrine. And right in the middle, as Paul shifts from doctrine to ethics, he offers a prayer.

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Here is Paul's deep hope for that ancient Ephesian congregation. He prays for strength, spiritual power, the inner dwelling of Christ in their hearts, for faith, for a profound understanding of love. These are all awesome prayers and would bring amazing blessing. Paul wraps his prayer up with this awesome request:

That you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Here is the climax of his prayer, the highest request he has for them, his deepest hope for their wellbeing. May you be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

It's hard to express what this means. It sounds so mystical and unspeakable. After all, God is the Almighty, the Supreme Being in the entire universe. God has always been in existence and everything that exists—every galaxy, planet, sun, moon, creature, and human was created by God's hand. God is supremely powerful. God is perfect in every way with no flaws. God is a mystery of relationship, power, truth, holiness and knowledge.

We have a hard time just trying to speak of God. And then to pray that all his fullness will fill us sounds just as hard to imagine. How does the infinite fit into the finite? How does the divine dwell in the human? We know that Christ contains the fullness of God and is God himself. But how can we even speak of being filled with the full measure of the fullness of God?

I like how one Canadian missionary pastor in years past put it:

Being filled with the fullness of God is like a bottle in the ocean. You take the cork out of the bottle and sink it in the ocean, and you have the bottle completely full of ocean. The bottle is in the ocean, and the ocean is in the bottle. The ocean contains the bottle, but the bottle contains only a little bit of the ocean. So it is with the Christian.

A. B. Simpson (1843-1919)

You are filled like a bottle in the ocean of God.

Soon we are going to sing the song “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”. I love the last phrase of that song; it hits me every time:

Lost in wonder, love and praise

What puts a smile on my face is vision that that one day I will be so bound up in the great crowd of heaven, all of them casting crowns before the throne of God, and be lost in wonder, love and praise. That speaks to me of something of what it means to be filled with the fullness of God already now. When you are full of what God can give you, you lose yourself; you find yourself filled with wonder, with love, with praise.

When you are filled with the fullness of God, you regain your sense of wonder. You see the world in a different way, charged with God, with the brightness of his being. You see his signature all over the creation. I love hearing from Christian scientists who are filled with wonder, who see the exquisite design God placed in this universe. They get to see it everywhere from the microscope to the telescope. I love hearing from children who have this amazing capacity for wonder. I love hearing from farmers who speak about their land with a special reverence. I love hearing from people who are in crisis who are amazed at a peace that passes all understanding and wonder about that. When you are filled with what God can give you, you get new eyes to see.

When you are filled with the fullness of God, you regain your sense of love. God is love. Love permeates his being. At the centre of the universe is a Triune community of self-giving love. When God fills you with his fullness, you learn to love all over again. You learn to give yourself away for love, to sacrifice for love, to live for love. Your heart gains a capacity for love that you never thought you had. A love that is gracious, merciful, yet also formidable and protecting. When you are filled with what God can give you, you get a new heart to love.

And when you are filled with the fullness of God, you regain your voice of praise. You are meant to worship. You are a worshiping being and either you worship something in the creation or you worship the true God. That which you focus your heart on—your thoughts, your energy—that is the object of your worship. When God fills you, you find that your worship is directed properly, addressing the true God. When you are filled with what God can give you, you find a new voice.

Lost in wonder, love and praise. Full with the fullness of God. Given new eyes to see, a new heart to love, a new voice of praise.

There are no conditions that have to be in place for this to happen. You don't have to be free from the pandemic. You don't have to be healthy, rich, put-together, successful. The Ephesians were living in times when new religions were persecuted. Paul may have been writing this letter from jail. He struggled with a thorn in his flesh his whole life. This fullness does not depend on your circumstances.

Jesus once said

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. John 7:37-38

God's purpose and desire for us is that our whole being may be so saturated and charged with an indwelling divinity that there will be no room in our hearts for more, and no sense of want or emptiness. We will be filled with love, wonder, understanding, peace, joy and blessedness, praise.

It is from this fullness that we live out the Christian life. It is from this abundance that we help others, be a good neighbor, contribute to the public good, and invite others to join us.

We worry that the malaise of COVID will affect our engagement with our Christian faith, especially our engagement with Sunday worship. Churches are worried about how COVID will affect their memberships. They are afraid that people have become so used to not coming to church that they will get out of the habit and stop.

Yet there is something among us that is better than anything the world could offer. There is a source of living water that nothing can stop. The ancient Christians discovered that persecution couldn't keep them from wondering, from loving, from praising. And in our times a pandemic can't keep us from these things.

You get it from God. You get this in community with his holy people.

Here at the highest point of Paul's prayer for the Ephesians, we get a sense of the fullest kind of life there is possible--that we may be filled with the very things that fill God: Love, Spirit, power, knowledge. This is the objective, the goal, of Paul's prayer.

If you're wondering what to pray for your neighbor, pray Paul's prayer of Ephesians 3. If you're wondering why you should stay engaged with church, pray this prayer. If you're wondering what is the deep hope of this new pastor for this congregation, for our neighbours, for our city. It's to be filled with the fullness of God. That's the highest privilege, the greatest joy. It is the greatest thing Paul or any church leader can pray for his church. It's the greatest thing we can long for our world.

As we approach the Lord's table, we get a taste of what this full life is. It is in Christ, and his deep acceptance of us. It is being part of his story of redemption. It is to lift our hearts to heaven to where God is. It is to receive in our spirits the very things that fill God. From this abundance we will be the people we need to be here in Kitchener. We will have it in us to live into the mission of Christ even now.

As you receive the sacrament, may you be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

AMEN