

SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 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. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever.

SERMON: "Surpassing Knowledge"

In every profession there are conversations that you look forward to and conversations that you dread. There are those topics that simply are engrained in your work. There is one kind of conversation that I absolutely relish. It happens every single time I do pre-marital counseling. By the way, it also happened once on the tenth fairway of the golf course, with somebody who wasn't a member of this church walking towards the green. I will tell you that the conversation is part and parcel of every single Bible study we have ever held at the church. But I also had one just as important in the cutting garden at Woven Roots Farm in Tyringham. There's a conversation woven through my many chats with my step-mom in her final years. It was the conversation that was on the lips of John Robinson as he left for the New World. And it was just the kind of message that I tried to give to the kids today in the Kids' Time. It's the kind of conversation that I'm trying to have with my son Jakey about how to grow up and be a good person. It is the conversation that this thing of life, that this endeavor of faith, the ideas of truth and beauty and love, too, that all of them are things of opening or becoming. They're things of transcending who we are. They are things of getting us beyond ourselves to something greater, better, deeper, more beautiful.

To read the gospels is to encounter a Christ who almost never answered questions, but instead posed hundreds of them, that people might contemplate. It is to encounter a person who rarely lectured. Instead, he almost always told stories or parables that defy any easy answer, any closing off, any narrowing. Instead, the stories were about widening. And Jesus did it, not just in the good times, but when he too was walking through the shadow of death.

I find these conversations -- about openness and learning and becoming -- so natural in times of abundance or possibility or new beginnings. I've also, though, found them equally comfortable when the veneers of life have been pulled back, at a funeral or with somebody facing difficulty, when nothing short of honesty will do. And yet I also know this, that in moments of struggle, in times when we see scarcity or threat rather than abundance and possibility, times when we worry about how many people are in these pews instead of being overjoyed that you are here, the temptation to need to know, to want to understand, to have something to hold onto wins out, rather than opening up our faith. We engage in those moments in something more akin to drawing boundaries or closing in, defining what to believe rather than daring to live *how* to believe. We circle the wagons, we huddle under blankets over and over again against what is out

there, what we don't know, even if such a posture invariably leads to only a smaller and smaller circle. No, opening to mystery, opening to beauty, to things that are indeed beyond us, things that make life richer, fuller, worth living, and worthy of the God who created it all, all of that calls us to draw the circle wide, and then draw it wider still. And it is good.

On his 39th birthday on a Thursday in 2005, poet, scholar, teacher, luminary Christian Wiman received a voicemail that could easily have caused him to turn in, to grasp onto anything that was nearby. He came back home to find a message on his voicemail from his doctor, and with it a diagnosis of incurable blood cancer, along with a cheery message that said "I'll be back in the office on Monday, feel free to give me a call then and we can talk further." It would have been understandable for Wiman, already a decorated poet, the head of a great poetry magazine, to take stock of what was good in life and what he wanted out of life and just to stick with it. Instead, Wiman set out on a journey. And now 16 years later, he is still teaching, and in all places, he's teaching at a seminary, because through this he has found his way to a deeper, fuller, richer true understanding of who God is and why it matters. In those 16 years he would say his journey has been undergirded by this insight: that Wiman has no idea how to come closer to God except to be standing where the world is ending. A truth that only a poet could let us know. But yet, his point is well taken. How can we expand if we are contracting? To be on a journey which we so often call this thing called church by definition requires us to let go of wherever we started, that we might instead get somewhere else.

Wiman begins one of his works which is one of my favorites, entitled "My Bright Abyss," with this short poem. "My God, my bright abyss, into which all my longing will not go, once more I come to the edge of all I know. And believing nothing, believe in this." Letting go of all he knows, he believes in the God who, as Jonathan Edwards would say, hold us in God's loving hands.

Wiman chose what Paul writes about in this morning's Scripture lesson. The critical ingredient of what we try to practice in being church, not so much what, but *how*. If you need a pick-me-up, if it's ever a rainy day (can't imagine that...), grab Ephesians. Gorgeous. This passage in Ephesians comes at the end of a long section, two whole chapters, in which Paul has been doing what Paul does: addressing matters of doctrine. What to believe, how to believe it, what matters, what's true, what's not true, all of that. It's doctrine about right practice, theological considerations. All of it is important and all of it is good, all of it necessary endeavors for a flock of faith like ours. But at the end of all that, he offers today's reading, which scholars understand to be a prayer, which by definition is an opening up to what is beyond us. A prayer for the people of Ephesus, Paul's prayer, like Wiman's poetry after him, has a simple message: Let go, and jump in. Let go of what you think you know, and jump in. And in this case, jump in to the mystery of love. And not just any love, but the full and real love of Christ. One that, if you look at Christ's life, is mind-bogglingly beautiful. A way of life so simple, and yet whose abundance surpasses all our human understanding.

In Eugene Peterson's Bible translation, "The Message," the sense of the meaning of this passage comes through in this verse. He writes this: "Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in." Paul's challenge to Ephesus -- you need to know they were a sophisticated people, they were a knowledgeable people, they were a confident people -- was this: You know a

whole lot about a whole lot. But the question is: Will you let Christ in? Will you let Christ take you to that place where the world ends, that abyss at the end of our knowing? And by the way, the “you” in Paul’s writing is almost always plural. And so that question is: Will *we* let Christ take *us* to that place where the world ends? Will we let him take us, and will we jump in? It’s the never ending question that we face here, too, in Stockbridge. Will we let go of something so good and so beautiful and so true, for something more?

I care about the quality of how we do things here. I love planning and imagining worship. I can get obsessed with details of worship, all to make sure we don’t get in the way, that all who come through the door experience something true – just ask the deacons! I love to teach and I love to learn in adult ed. I can thoroughly geek out on translation, on subtext, on grammar and context, to get to what a passage “really” means, in the hopes that everyone in the room can apply it to their real life. Just ask anyone who’s been in a class with me. I do want the flow of worship to be crisp. I want our building – not just in the sanctuary, but outside – to proclaim peace, justice, mercy and love. I want the music of this place to be so glorious that the next Charles Ives who just happens to be walking by on any Sunday morning becomes so inspired by your singing that he or she writes music about it. I want us to live up to and through the lineage of our forebears, whether Jonathan Edwards or Marj Fuller, whether the two Bobs (Williams and Wilmot!) or Marian Knowles, whether a famous theologian or a less worldly known saint. But also, as I’m obsessed with all this, I try to remember the risk that all of that can stray into doing the *what* we know rather than the *how* God is showing us to live. It can cross that line into holding on to what has worked for us rather than what might be an even deeper, more faithful way. Most of all, focusing on our gifts and what we’re good at, rather than the ultimate gift of God which is revealed fully in the love of Christ. Reviewing, rehearsing and recording in the knowledge we have gained, rather than opening our eyes and our minds to be blown. As Paul says, we will know the very fullness of God. Can you imagine? We welcome everyone here, but does that everyone include Christ himself? Because to do so means acknowledging our world as we know it just might end.

Anne LaMott tells of her own conversion story. She had been going to church for awhile, and she’d become more and more aware of Jesus sitting in the back corner, staring at her throughout worship, just watching her the whole time. No matter what she did, he was watching. But watching with patience and love. And then there was one Sunday where she says she felt as if the people were singing between the notes. They were weeping and joyful at the same time. She says she opened up to the feelings of others, and it washed over her in powerful ways. But it wasn’t until she got home to her houseboat, where she said something that I can’t say in church, it rhymes with bucket. And then she said out loud to Jesus, “All right! Fine! You can come in already.” And she’s gone on to be a great writer of faith and mystery.

We get moved here all the time in this place, and it’s beautiful, it’s vulnerable, it’s true. And are we ready here in God’s house to say out loud, “Jesus, come on in!” Do we dare? Because this prayer of Paul’s is a prayer of hope, hope for something different, that we let Christ take over the church. A prayer for power and for love, for courage and humility. And it promises what Paul found, to literally come face to face with the fullness of God. If that isn’t amazing, I don’t know what is.

Friends, Christian Wiman continues to write and teach in ways that settle for nothing short of truth. He describes God in phrases like this: He describes God as annihilating truth, one we must both endure and enjoy. He proclaims the definition of faith to be the word “faith” decaying into pure meaning. He does not shy away from the grief of a hard life, but he also constantly asks God to make more of his anguish than he can. Most of all, though, since that voicemail, since the jumping into the abyss and finding rot and rage, God and grace, Wiman writes more and more these days about joy. He says he wasn’t able to write about full joy until he got sick. He said it isn’t that the sickness brought him joy, far from it, but rather the sickness caused him to let go of reliance on himself and what he knew, and instead to jump into the love of God. He said his sickness made him much more conscious of how much joy was already in his life, and was the impetus to simply articulate it.

To Wiman’s story, I think Paul would say “Yep, that’s right, that’s what I’m talking about. You go! Live, live at the edge of everything, always letting go, that you might be held anew.” That *we* might keep opening to what is beyond our understanding. For what waits at the end, if we do it, is fullness. Not just human fullness, but the fullness of God.

Friends, in case you didn’t hear them, I want to close my sermon with the words Paul closed his prayer with. I want you to shut your eyes and listen, because if you live your life by the mantra of these words, your life will be nothing short of amazing. Let us pray:

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever.” And let the whole church say Amen.