

“Fuller”

*A sermon preached on Ephesians 3.14-21 (focused on v. 18-19)
by Emily Hull McGee at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC
on Sunday, October 21, 2018*

I.

It all began on a walk. Well, it was more like a hike. Traversing the Kachkar Mountains just east of the Black Sea between where Turkey and Russia now sit, their group came upon the ruins of what once was a Byzantine church unparalleled in its beauty.

Local rock had been fashioned into the arches and stonework that dot architecture textbooks the whole world over. Those buildings became the canvas of artists whose religious frescoes defined sacred artwork for generations. Thousands of years ago, these cathedrals were once built amidst the flourishing spread of Christianity to the region, its walls and spires reaching into the heavens as a beacon for the Christ they professed.

As centuries have passed, the centrality of these churches waned from core to peripheral to afterthought. Civilization moved and grew past them, and the religious landscape shifted right in their backyard. The most beautiful parts of the stone have been sold, as have the carvings and doors and floors and even the roof. In their place are now all manner of purposes — some are museums, but others are soccer fields or abandoned lots or farms. All that remains of such ruins are their walls, maybe an arch or two, and if you're lucky enough as they were that day, the slightest hint of a fresco that has survived the wear of years. Faded but unmistakable is the face of Christ

— eyes wide and arresting, arm raised, fingers curled in blessing to a church nowhere to be found.¹

II.

That very same region was once the land fertile with the growth of the church, the land Paul set forth to share the good news, the land of the Galatians, Colossians, and yes, the Ephesians. On this third of four weeks of our exploration of the Letter to the Ephesians' beautiful prayer for the people of God, our attention turns today to the final two petitions found in verses 18 and 19. Scott's reading just reminded us of the first two parts of the prayer: I pray that God may grant your strength in your inner being, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. Together in these October weeks, we've talked about what it means to find strength not in brute force or external resources but instead from the inside, the quiet, often unseen places of our lives and our church whose health is critical to the overall whole. We've considered what it means to invite Christ to move into our lives and our church, not just for a short stay or an extended visit, but rooting and grounding within us for good. With such a foundation, we look together at the dual exhortation: to comprehend and to know.

First: "I pray that you ['y'all'] may have the power [or the 'strength'] to comprehend with all the saints," the writer says — 'comprehend,' or 'understand,' or perhaps best, 'to grasp' or hold onto truth that is beyond our capacity for full and comprehensive knowing... 'to grasp what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth.' Notice the text doesn't tell us what vast dimensions we're grasping. The breadth, length, height, depth of what,

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "He Who Fills All in All," *Home By Another Way*, p136-137.

exactly? Context clues tell us that the writer wants us to comprehend the incomprehensible, to understand the limitless, to grasp that which cannot be contained or caught: that is, the vast boundlessness of God — God’s grace and mercy and love made flesh in Jesus Christ that spills over from any attempt of the human imagination or reason to capture it whole.²

Then the prayer continues: “... and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” To know the unknowable, that which is beyond knowledge, an oxymoron of utter significance. For that which we are to know is the vast and boundless love of Christ, a love we never fully can understand because it trespasses all the boundaries we humans use to contain love, to limit it, to make it reasonable and defined and specific.

And why are we grasp the limitless and know the unknowable? “... so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” The writer here returns to a theme from the beginning of the letter to the Ephesians, where he praised God, gave thanks for Jesus Christ, and exhorted the church to be his extensions, his reach here in the world. “And God has put all things under Christ’s feet,” the writer says, “and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, *the fullness of him who fills all in all.*”³ This idea of fullness, of being filled, is akin to that of completeness. In other words, the words from our prayer here could have said: “so that you may be filled [or

² Exegetical work this week and throughout this section comes from three primary sources that were of great help: Allen Verhey and Joseph S. Harvard, *Ephesians*, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p. 126-129; George W. Stroup, “Ephesians 3:14-21,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, p278-282; and Pheme Perkins, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, vol XI, p414-417.

³ Ephesians 1:22-23

completed] with all the fullness of God [or with the one who completes all things].”

III.

We know from the earliest words in Ephesians that this letter was written to the church, but it could be words directly for you and me and each of us as individuals, right? For how quickly we assume that whatever power we have comes from ourselves. How often we think that the mysteries of God in this world are easily explained, rationally considered, and well within our reach. How tightly we draw the boundaries of Christ’s love within our knowledge, not his; our sense of who’s in and out, our sense of right and wrong. How filled we are with our agenda, our calendar, our plan, our goals, our desires instead of being filled with God in all the divine fullness.

Even when we fail to admit it or see it, these are the situations and the moments that leave us wanting. T. S. Eliot once wrote poetically:

Remember us — if at all — not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men.
The stuffed men.⁴

Sounds familiar, right? Too often we’re hollow and, therefore, stuffed. We’re empty with grief or anger or fear or crisis, and thus we’re stuffed with busyness and distraction and money and addiction. We press God to find out the limits of God’s love to fill the void in our lives, and we struggle to trust a love whose breadth, length, height, and depth stretches beyond our wildest dreams. We think we can think or work or buy ourselves out of that void, and

⁴ As quoted by Rev. Guy Sales in his sermon, “Our Vast and Loving God,” http://day1.org/3945-our_vast_and_loving_god. Original poem from T. S. Eliot’s *Selected Poems* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1936), p. 77.

we fail to realize that the fullness of God fills even the emptiest of places just because God can and does. Even the mere risk of letting go, laying down, emptying, giving up, having less, unclenching our grip on what we have and what we think we need is just too big a risk to bear. For what could be worth such an act?

IV.

A few months ago, I went for a sacred walk. I wasn't in the Kachkar Mountains between Turkey and Russia, so you wouldn't have called it a hike! Rather I was right at the corner of Fifth and Spruce, within the walls that are here no longer. Then it was early July, and heat seeped in under cracks and through gaps between windows and frames that had never fully closed. In just a few days, fencing would begin to encircle our property. Crews in fluorescent yellow vests and hard hats would soon take up residence here, hammers and hatchets in hand to tear out cabinetry, remove doors, take down lights, and fully prepare the inside for what was to come. Weeks later on a clear September Tuesday morning, steel and brick and plaster and wire and tile would move from standing to grounded.

But to my eyes, the Great Emptying had already taken place. Under the careful and wise guidance of Scott Hudgins, a Deacon subgroup, and so many of you who pitched in tirelessly to help, Buildings B & C were scoured from breadth to length, height to depth. What could be reused was moved; what could be sold or donated was marked; what should be preserved was saved; what had passed its moment of usefulness was discarded. Vases, books, choir robes, set pieces, roller skates, spaghetti pots, refrigerators, tablecloths, keyboards, TVs, computers, speakers, folding chairs, sitting chairs, signs,

basketballs, round tables, square tables, little tables, coffee tables, food tables, toys, trash cans, bowls, salt shakers, couches, lamps, Christmas trees, bookcases, racks, shelves, displays, mirrors, rugs, art supplies, baskets, pianos, plants, pictures, pews, plaques, portraits, papers, a pink pig placard ... and yes, probably even a partridge in a pear tree! Ask any of the volunteers who went through it all, and they'd likely tell you that First Baptist was filled with all the fullness of stuff! But one by one, piece by piece, hand in hand, we surveyed what we had, assessed what we needed, turned loose of what we'd kept, and set free what we'd become.

And in all its vacancy and emptiness, I felt an overwhelming sense of fullness follow me through those hollowed-out hallways. Because as I walked the space one final time, I could hear the echoes of *love and life*: the pounding and cheering of basketball games long passed, the singing and celebrating of life's transitions in the chapel, the care shared in friendship and companionship in Sunday School classroom after classroom, the squeals of adolescent laughter in our Children's Center, the moments when God met us at the Wednesday night dinner table, or grieved with us in the pew, or laid down beside us in the face of the one settling in for a warm rest on a cold night atop a cot in the gym. Each memory, each moment supplanted in the spirit of the traveler who carries it without the baggage of all the rest weighing it down.

Yes, we are a church who now has less stuff and less space. We continue to be in the process of releasing and unburdening ourselves from what has filled us for many years. And even in such a grand and communal emptying, God continues to invite us — each and every one of us — to loosen

our grip on our money and our resources, that which provides for us a sense of comfort, security, and assuredness. We are being asked to give up in order that we might receive.

Why? *So that we may be filled.* With what? *With all the fullness of God.* Come again? *All the fullness and completeness of God* — God’s love and peace, joy and hope, care and justice, generosity and grace, wisdom and courage and kindness and ferocity and mystery and abundance, all there as gift if only we choose to lay down what we have in order that God might fill us with such gifts beyond the farthest reaches of our imagination.

You might even say we’re taking our cue from Jesus, who in the words of Philippians, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness... humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.”⁵

V.

I don’t know why that church in Turkey lay in ruin. I would imagine that those who built its walls did so to create a space in which to capture the mystery of God, to give all who could take up residence within the imagination of the breadth, the height, the length, and the depth of God’s greatness and love. And standing here in this glorious space today, I get that! I’m sure, like any organizational change, there were a number of forces that led to such an outcome.

But I wonder if we might hear for ourselves an invitation to consider how we attend carefully and intentionally to the presence of God in our

⁵ Philippians 2:6-8

midst. I wonder what might happen if we asked God to take the empty spaces of our lives, our church, even our space and not leave them abandoned, but instead to take root and fill them with all the fullness of Love. I wonder what God might do for you and you and you and me and us.

I can't predict the future, but I have boundless hope that within the breadth and length and height and depth of our time and place, we'll catch a glimpse of the face of Christ – eyes wide and arresting, arm raised, fingers curled in blessing to a church who has built beyond its walls to bring about the kingdom of God right in our midst. May it be so! Amen.