

## **“Strength from the Inside”**

*A sermon preached on Ephesians 3.14-21 (focused on v. 14-16)  
by Emily Hull McGee at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC  
on World Communion Sunday, October 7, 2018*

### I.

As I shared earlier at the beginning of worship, our worship today is special for several reasons. We celebrate World Communion Sunday, where communities of Christians from around the globe gather at the table of the Lord. And perhaps it's appropriate that within this framework, we mark the first of four Sundays together preaching through and praying about our church's capital campaign, called *A Boundless Home: Building Beyond Walls*. Throughout the month of October, we'll be engaging with scripture in worship a bit differently than we usually do. Instead of letting a different passage of scripture inform our worship each week, we'll be using the same one all month, unpacking different key phrases as the month progresses.

You heard Chris read it moments ago, this beautiful prayer written to the church by Paul, or perhaps more likely, in Paul's name. The opening words of Ephesians salute ‘... the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus.’ All throughout the letter, the writer constantly focuses his attention on unity in the body of Christ and a oneness of Christian people. In particular, the writer had received clear revelation from God through the Spirit that Gentiles, the non-Jewish people who were receiving the good news of Christ, were also fellow heirs to the promises of God, and they too were members of the body of Christ. Up until this point in the letter, the writer goes to great lengths to outline such a theology. Immediately following our passage, how one is to apply this theology in the everyday

living will be described. But for this section, and “for this reason,” the writer begins, gathering up all his passion for the people of God to unfurl a four-fold prayer of petitions for the sake of his readers in the verses that follow. We’ll consider the first petition in verse 16 today, but before we do so, let’s take a look at the beginning statements of the prayer in verses 14 and 15.

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,” or *pater* in the Greek, “from whom every family” – or *patria* in the Greek – in heaven and on earth takes its name.” The claim here is clear – no matter the lineage or tribe or family anywhere at anytime, no matter who is deemed to be “in” or “out,” and as we celebrate today, no matter what nation you call your own, all are part of God’s family.<sup>1</sup> Such a declaration echoes Paul’s triumphant words in Galatians, speaking a fierce word of unity into division within the family of God, “there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

Having established such a groundwork, the writer begins to pray: “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.” That phrase, “the riches of God’s glory,” speaks of God’s good and grace-filled relationship with all creation. We then hear the first part of the prayer: “.. God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his spirit.” It’s important to note here that the original Greek says ‘you’ plural... or what the North Carolina translation would call ‘y’all’: “I pray that God may grant that y’all may be strengthened in y’all’s inner being,” would be one such

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<sup>1</sup> Helpful read from Karen Chakoian, “Ephesians 3:14-21,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, p278.

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 3:28

translation. Then “strengthened in your inner being,” or as *The Message* interprets it, “not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength,” is the heart of this first petition.<sup>3</sup> All of this, according to the writer, happens with power through God’s Spirit at work within us.<sup>4</sup>

Read together, it seems to me that it’s only through God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are bound up — all families, all nations, all people — and that the writer’s prayer for this church (and we might add: as with *any* church) begins first with strength from the inside. Why, we wonder, is that so important?

## II.

If you read our weekly newsletter ‘eBlast’ this past week, you heard me talk about how meaningful our small group gatherings have been over the past two weeks, gatherings to talk about our building project and capital campaign. These ten gatherings drew to a close on Thursday night, where a wonderful crew of folks gathered for conversation, coffee, and key lime pie in a warm welcome to Alana and Mark Williams’ house.

After all the official business was over and the unofficial business of pie had begun, I was asking Mark and Alana about their lovely home, which is located behind the campus of Wake Forest just off Faculty Drive. Mark excitedly began to tell me about their home of six years, particularly about the magnificent canopy of trees that stretches over their land. Nestled under such a forest, these two enjoy cool afternoons and quiet evenings, refuge and peace. “We really love it,” Mark said, “but the tree maintenance can be tricky!”

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<sup>3</sup> *The Message* translation of Ephesians 3:16

<sup>4</sup> More helpful commentary from Arland Hultgren at The Working Preacher: [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=353](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=353)

They told me of a redwood oak tree, right by their house, stretching tall and majestic to the sky. It was beautiful and strong – or so they thought. One day they came home to find that it had just snapped in two. They were stunned – there had been no storm, no windy weather event that could have shaken its roots, nothing. But when the tree care professionals came to remove it, they found that the redwood oak – *while seemingly healthy and handsome on the outside* – had been completely hollowed out by disease on the inside. Without the fortitude that comes from inner strength inside its trunk, it's no wonder that the tree broke firmly in half.<sup>5</sup>

### III.

As I heard that story, it sounded strangely familiar to me. For our building project is teaching us a thing or two about the inner being at First Baptist right now, right? Yes, there has been much to see outside our facilities – the buildings that have come down, the machinery needed to make it possible, the fencing that keeps it all enclosed. And even today, we can start imagining what our new bathrooms in the narthex will look like upon their completion. But if you think about it, the vast majority of the work that will be completed in Phase One is the stuff we don't easily see because either it's **high** – the new roof to be installed all around our building, the structural supports and restoration of the steeple tower, the repaired limestone and repointed terra cotta at the roofline and higher – or because it's **hidden** – abatement to safely remove hidden asbestos before tearing down Buildings B & C, dirt that will fill in the hole in the back of the property before it is covered with gravel and grass, the new electrical panels and

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<sup>5</sup> With thanks to Mark and Alana Williams for sharing such a meaningful story!

switchgear, along with a new transformer to power it, a new boiler and a new chiller, and repaired plumbing and gutters.

Now some of you engineers in the room may argue with me on this, and I'm going to show my bias here, but I'd say that none of these things are all that fun to do, or showy, exciting, or stimulating. As much as I've tried, it's hard to get oneself truly electrified over a new transformer, or roused by a new boiler. This kind of work is like when you have to spend money on new tires instead of a new car, repair work in your home instead of an impressive new addition. Who ever wants to do that?!

However. Without a new roof, we'd continue to see leaks here and here and into the organ chamber. Without a new boiler, we'd be freezing in the winter; without a new chiller, we'd be hot in the summer. Without a new transformer and electrical panels and switchgear, we wouldn't enjoy electricity in our space. Without careful attention given to exterior restoration, our building would continue to erode out in the elements, eventually threatening the integrity of the space itself. Without the dirt that will provide a new foundation for our backyard and back parking, we'd have to dodge holes and trenches just to walk around our land. And without addressing the ways our facilities have hindered our shared energy and resources for ministry, we might never hear a clear invitation to create a boundless home through First Baptist Church on Fifth.

For it seems to me, my friends, that we are *strengthening the inner being* of our church house — the systems and shingles and structures — that make it possible to even have a church house in the first place. If not for this work, there'd be no need to do any other work. Without it, our building

would be like Mark and Alana's hollowed out tree. This project is **that** critical, that vital, that necessary to keep us here and safe and dry and functioning.

But surely we know not to confuse the church *building* with the church itself. And we know that whatever renovation and restoration we do to our **building's** 'inner being' invites us to consider how we might renovate and restore our **own** 'inner being' too.

#### IV.

Sisters and brothers, such an invitation lies before each and every one of us, one that in any age but especially in ours today is critical, vital, and necessary. And so I ask: how might you invite God's Spirit to strengthen you from the inside out? What inner systems are broken in your own life of faith, causing you to flood with fear, overheat with anger, chill with indifference, and dim with despair? What structures in your daily life — your rhythms, routines, habits, practices — are in need of new restoration? What do you need to excavate, and what might you shore up? Where are you maintaining the outer facade — the forced smile, the uncomfortable pleasantries, the attention to body as mask and armor — and doing so at the expense of or in place of your inner soul?<sup>6</sup>

From 'you' to 'y'all', we then must ask ourselves: where are places in the deep recesses of our church's life together that need our attention? Where must we give attention to our church's relational systems and our internal structures, lest they rot with disease or disorder without us even realizing it? What renovation will we undergo to our church's heart? What restoration will we seek of our church's soul? What foundation do we need to firm up?

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<sup>6</sup> Beautiful imagery from Guy Sales in his sermon "Our Vast and Loving God" on this text at [day1.org](http://day1.org/3945-our_vast_and_loving_god): [http://day1.org/3945-our\\_vast\\_and\\_loving\\_god](http://day1.org/3945-our_vast_and_loving_god)

And how can we check ourselves to be sure that in all that is happening around us and outside of us, we don't miss or forget about this vital work that needs to happen within us?

The great mystic Christian teacher and author, Thomas Merton, once said: "Our real journey in life is interior. It is a matter of growth, deepening, and an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts."<sup>7</sup> Such love and grace is at its most profound in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ — for all, in all, through all, and anchoring us all within that promise, that foundation of life.

Drawn from all around the world to be stitched together by the Spirit, we come to the table today. For here, the nourishment of Christ strengthens us from the inside out. For here we remember these words of blessing:

And the table will be wide.  
And the welcome will be wide.  
And the arms will open wide to gather us in.  
And our hearts will open wide to receive.  
And we will come as children who trust there is enough.  
And we will come unhindered and free.  
And our aching will be met with bread.  
And our sorrow will be met with wine.  
And we will open our hands to the feast without shame.  
And we will turn toward each other without fear.  
And we will give up our appetite for despair.  
And we will taste and know of delight.  
And we will become bread for a hungry world.  
And we will become drink for those who thirst.  
And the blessed will become the blessing.  
And everywhere will be the feast.<sup>8</sup>

Amen!

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<sup>7</sup> From Thomas Merton's *The Road to Joy*.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Richardson, "And the Table Will Be Wide," [janrichardson.com](http://janrichardson.com)