

The Power At Work In You
July 18, 2021
Ephesians 3:14-21
Rev. Dr. Tim Phillips



[Anthem: Come, O Fount of Every Blessing]

Thank you to these Summer Singers for reminding us this morning where we began these series on the Letter to the Ephesians: “Praise be our Creator who has bestowed on us *every spiritual blessing* in the heavens.”

So, one of the ways we are talking about God this morning is the “Fount of every blessing.”

Last Sunday, Pastor Anita brought us to the next section of Ephesians where God is breaking down the walls of hostility between us in order to create one new humanity being built together as a dwelling place for God. “While you were far away,” the letter says, “God has brought us near.”

So, we might talk about God this morning as that Spirit that is “closer to us than our own breath.”

Now, if you were to ask me what I’m talking about when I talk about God, I would point you to this next section of the letter, Ephesians 3.14-21:

This is why I kneel before Abba God, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. And I pray that God, out of the riches of divine glory, will strengthen you inwardly with power through the working of the Spirit. May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, so that you, being rooted and grounded in love, will be able to grasp fully the breadth, length, height, and depth of Christ’s love, and with all God’s holy ones – or beloved ones – experience this love that surpasses all understanding, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. To God – whose power now at work in us can do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine – to God be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus through all generations, world without end! Amen.

I use a lot of different language to talk about God. It’s all important because it represents the varied ways Grace shows up in the experiences of all our lives.

But if you push me to a bottom line, it would be this: God is that power already at work in you that is able to accomplish far more than any of us can ask or imagine.

Now I realize that talking about God as “power” can be dangerous – especially in the hands of the Church where it can mean “authority” or control or an excuse for discounting the realities of *human* life.

Believe me, I know.

But I don’t think we can run away from the exercise of power as authority just because it makes us uncomfortable. Ephesians won’t let us.

In the first chapter, Ephesians says: "... God has raised Christ far above every sovereignty, authority, power or dominion ... not only in this age but in the age to come ... God has put all things under Christ's feet."

And near the end of the letter, it says, that we should draw on that power of Christ because, "Our battle ultimately is not against human forces but against the sovereignties and powers, the rulers of this world."

When I talk about God as "power," I cannot ignore the exercise of authority.

Let me give you a personal example. You invite me to your house for dinner. We get settled at the table. And you look at me and I look at you and there is this awkward pause. Finally, you say, "would you like to pray?"

Now this is not something *you* routinely do but because there is a pastor in the house, you are asking me to exercise a power you think *I* have.

And I have to tell you that I am afraid of that kind of power. I know – you know – how religious authority has been misused in very destructive ways.

In fact, if I am completely honest, one of the big hurdles I had to face when I was called to be your pastor was that I didn't think I was powerful enough. I didn't have enough of that ego-strength I saw in successful big church pastors. I was often filled with self-doubt; constantly second-guessing myself; and most likely to defer to the wisdom of others. What kind of a leader is that?

And yet, here I am and you still ask me to pray at the dinner table.

This is one of the things our anti-racism work is teaching me. Part of my privilege is the ability to ignore my own power. I can pretend it away or dismiss it or act like I don't have it or need it.

But the truth is, I am powerful. And you are powerful. And you exercise your power every day as the authority to make decisions about what to do and say and how you will be in the world.

This anti-racism work is forcing me to get serious about my own power.

Some of us have been working through Layla Saad's *Me and White Supremacy*. She says: *Racism is the coupling of prejudice with power, where the dominant racial group (which in [our society] is people with white privilege) is able to dominate over all other racial groups and negatively affect those racial groups at all levels – personally, systemically, and institutionally.*

I have to acknowledge that I can't get anywhere in this anti-racism work if I do not recognize the power I have.

Remember those famous lines from Marianne Williamson in *Return to Love*?

Our deepest fear, she says, is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure ... You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

I get it that we may feel powerless. Especially these days. But I think that's a trick our psyche plays on us to keep us from owning your own lives.

Ephesians says that there is a power already at work in you that is able to accomplish far more than you can ask or imagine. You are more powerful than you know. You carry more influence than you can ever fully see. The exercise of your authority as a human being matters in the world because you are powerful. It will not help you to pretend otherwise.

After all, each of you has one of the greatest powers ever. *Never underestimate the power of showing up.*

But there is another kind of power in Ephesians. This is beyond power as authority. I call it "power as artistry." Because here is Ephesians 2.10: "We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to do the good things God created us to do from the beginning."

Did you know that there is the power of an artist flowing through your veins? I can't draw. I can barely sing. And I don't dance ... hardly at all. And yet, there is the power of an artist flowing in me.

I love Madeline L'Engle's description of art. She says:

... to paint a picture or to write a story or to compose a song is an incarnational activity. The artist is a servant who is willing to be a birthgiver ...each work of art, whether it is a work of great genius, or something very small, comes to the artist and says, "Here I am. Enflesh me. Give birth to me." And the artist either says [like Mary], "My soul doth magnify the Lord," and willingly becomes the bearer of the work, or refuses.

Beloved ones, beauty and creativity and innovation and imagination and love present themselves to you every day. And they say, "Make me alive. Give me birth. Bring me into the world today." And we can say yes or no. Don't worry that what you have to offer doesn't seem like that much. Don't worry that it may be something small or incomplete. Say "yes" because there is a power at work in you that is able to accomplish far more than you can ask or imagine.

And that makes me think that this power is about energy.

As we heard from David Horton two weeks ago, this power – this energy – is the power that raised Jesus from the dead.

Perhaps you get stuck on that. You don't know what to believe about resurrection. But there are ordinary resurrections that happen every day. You woke up this morning – that's a kind of resurrection. There are hopes that were dashed that still hang around to haunt us. There are those who hit bottom only to discover an energy that brought them back to life. There is the death of a loved one and, in your grieving, you discover a whole new world of relationships. Resurrections happen.

That power is already at work in you.

Pastor Anita talked last week about God breaking down the walls of our hostility to build one new humanity that will be a dwelling place for God. This is the energy it takes to *deconstruct* and to *reconstruct*.

And if it feels like this anti-racism work we are doing is a lot of deconstruction, it is. Undoing the white supremacy in which we live and move and have our being is hard. And it takes energy.

But it is an energy we all know. None of us can be as fully who we are without deconstructing some of those expectations other people held over us; without breaking familiar but destructive patterns; without dismantling some of those unhealthy stories we tell ourselves. I would not be standing here today if I didn't expend the energy to manage some of those voices in my own head about what it means to be a pastor.

Deconstruction is hard. But here's the thing. The same energy that is doing the *deconstructing* is, at the same time, doing the work of *reconstructing* a new way of being in the world; creating a new humanity; building a dwelling place for God.

Do you really want that "Beloved Community" of love and justice Dr. King talks about?

It will take some deconstructing and reconstructing energy. But that power is already at work in you.

And it is at work in you because there is the energy of love in you. This letter to the Ephesians hits us with this paradox about "grasping" fully the "breadth and length and height and depth" of a love that *surpasses* understanding. In other words, "grasping" must be something more than just accepting intellectually the concept of love. It must be a kind of comprehensive knowing that comes from experience – the experience of loving and being loved.

In our *Me and White Supremacy* book study, Layla Saad warns:

You will also need love for this journey because when the truth telling gets really hard, you will need something more powerful than pain and shame to encourage you to keep going. Pain and shame are neither desirable nor sustainable as long-term strategies for transformational change. It is my hope that love is what initially brought you to this work. It is my conviction that love is what will keep you going.

Dr. King says:

In a world depending on force, coercive tyranny, and bloody violence, you are challenged to follow the way of love. [And] You will discover that unarmed love is the most powerful force in all the world.

That power is already at work in you.

And this morning, I'm not asking you to believe it.
I am inviting you to *tap into it*.

In all my years of looking for it and living with it, I still do not fully understand the power of love. Love is a mystery and it generates a kind of energy beyond my ability to comprehend.

But, what I do know is that three of the most powerful words in the English language are "I love you."

And today, beloved ones, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Ephesians 3.14-21 is from the *Inclusive Bible* (Priests for Equality, Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007). Layla Saad, *me and white supremacy* (Sourcebooks, 2020), pp. 107 & 19. Marianne Williamson, *Return to Love* from www.goodreads.com. Madeline L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art* (Harold Shaw Publishers, 1980), p. 18. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Paul's letter to American Christians," *Strength to Love* (Fortress Press, 1963), p. 144-145.