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Sunday morning service

Providence Baptist Church
Hendersonville, North Carolina

“Where Providence Dwells”

Ephesians 3: 14-21

Paul, beginning his prayer to the Ephesians says, *“For this reason* I kneel before the Father from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.”

For this reason, I begin here as pastor.

For this reason, I share my prayer for Providence Baptist Church with you now.

“What?” you say. “What are you talking about? I’m confused.”

See, Paul, like me, begins his prayer, as we say in literary terms *in medias res*—Latin for “in the middle of things.” Of course, we know that something was going on before he got to this part of the prayer. A *lot* was going on.

I like this because I feel like I am joining this congregation *in medias res*. I’m not under some illusion that the church or the real work begins now that I’m here. Just like Paul’s work for the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles had been going on for a long time, so the work of this body has been going on strong since its inception under the leadership of Gail Coulter and recently under Randy Wright.

But for the sake of understanding the full story of Paul and his prayer, let’s go to the beginning—the beginning of his letter to the Ephesians. He writes, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.” Now, allow me some interpretive license here as I appropriate this prayer as my own for you. “Julie Merritt Lee, a minister of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints at Providence, the faithful in Christ Jesus. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

I love this introduction because it affirms who you are—your identity as saints—those faithful in Christ Jesus. I hope you’ll start seeing yourself this way if you haven’t already.

And now on to chapter 3, where our prayer is imbedded. First, Paul gives the reason for why he became a minister of the gospel, and it just so happens that it appropriately fits my reason, so again let me use interpretive license. “I, Julie, became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to Providence Baptist Church the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery.” This explains the mystic in me—I believe all people can know intimately the love and mystery of God, and it’s my deepest desire to try to make clear the path to get there.

A few verses later and Paul’s prayer begins: *“For this reason*, I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.”

For this reason, I kneel before the Father.

Two weeks ago I heard a sermon that really spoke to me. Maybe you heard it too. It was Randy's sermon. Let me jog your memory if you don't remember it exactly. The title was "How do you know a good sermon when you hear it?" And he mentioned this one word that has stuck with me—submission. He said "Don't be afraid of the word submission." Paul, myself, and all of you come to this house of worship every week and kneel before the Father and one another in submission. Of course we have something to hear from God, and we also have something to learn from each other.

So here, alongside Paul, *my* Trinitarian prayer for you begins—first by submission to the Father. Next, "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being." My prayer is that you are strengthened by God's Spirit. This strength comes from God's glorious riches—God's providence: The God of infinite resources is able to provide every need. Not that everything is right in the world, but we have faith that God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

Let me share with you a dream of one Seattle, seasoned pastor named Edward. He was sitting in his old, dilapidated '63 VW bug at a stoplight. Next to him, was a red Porsche. The man in the car began gunning his engine, so he began gunning his, showing him that he was willing to race. The man in the Porsche was young and handsome, and sitting next to him was his hot, young "thang." He looked over at Edward, while he was putting a cigarette to his lips. Edward looked back, drinking from a carton of milk. "He gunned his engine again to quite a roar; Edward gunned his engine again, to the sound of a whining tight rubber band. The light changed. Wheels whirled and there was blue smoke all over the pavement as [Edward] pulled away from him. The night before in [his] dream, a new Ferrari engine had been installed in [his] VW bug, and [he] had power, real power, fast power. As [Edward] pulled away from the young man, his young chick was heard to exclaim: 'What does he have under that hood???'"¹

What do we have under our hood? Providence dwells there. Do you know what that means? Do you know what kind of power this Spirit is? Let me remind you. Paul talks about it in the beginning of this letter, Ch 1, verse 19: "It is his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms." The power that raised Jesus from the dead, that performed miracles like multiplying loaves and fish for a crowd of 5000, that's in us, for us who believe. I don't think we really believe this. We set our expectations low. Maybe God will show up, maybe not. Maybe God will answer prayer, maybe not. Maybe God will heal me, maybe not. Maybe we will see God's power displayed here, maybe not. But the truth shouts to us in verse 20 here, "He who is able to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine," is at work within us. You say, "Well, what does this power look like. I don't experience it like a surmounting power that's going to explode within us and do the miraculous." Our definition of power is impoverished. We have seen how power is played out in our society, in media, and there's a disconnect in our spiritual lives when we talk about God's

¹ "The Power of God Living Within Us," Edward F. Markquart.
www.sermonsfromseattle.com/books_ephesians_thepower.htm

power.

We see power like magic as in Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings. Power is seen through lightning bolts or magical rings that we wear. In our spiritual journeys we're not given magical rings or impenetrable capes or Superman X-ray vision but we have been given the Spirit of power. And this power is mysterious. I think we look in the wrong places and don't recognize the spirit's power. Sometimes we don't have eyes to see that we are being strengthened with this Power. Sometimes we are not aware, attentive to the strength that is in our inner being or in our church.

Where do you need strengthening? Are you struggling with an illness? Are you dealing with grief and loss over the death of someone you loved very much? Is it hope that you will survive a bad decision you made that is wreaking consequences? Pray that you will have eyes to see what God's power looks like: where there's illness, may you see wholeness and healing that surpasses recovery. Where there's grief, may you sense God's presence that doesn't take the grief away but helps you move through it with hope. And where there's chaos from sin, may you know the grace that forgives you, sustains you and redeems you in the process. This is God's power.

Think about a time lately that you have seen God's power displayed: maybe in an answer to prayer, a moment when you've said "my cup runneth over." I've seen God's power displayed through Providence—when twenty people show up to help me move and celebrate it like it's a party and not a chore and even collect money to help a man in need. This is Providential Power. This is the Power within this Church. This is exciting!

And the reason for this power? The text says, "So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." Isn't this our deepest longing? That Christ would dwell here? This has been the prayer of God's people since the beginning of the covenant with Israel. For Ezekiel recounts the word of God, "My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people." This is my prayer for this church: That Christ continues to dwell here. That you would feel God's presence in this place and in your hearts.

Next, I pray like Paul "that you being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, 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." This is the culmination of the prayer, that after submission to the Father, and experiencing the Spirit's strength and Christ's indwelling—to know fullness. Again, the mystic in me, sees this as possible, to know ultimate union with God.

But it's predicated on "being rooted and grounded in love"—somehow grasping the immeasurableness of God's love. How is this possible? If it's immeasurable, how could we begin to contain it? Well, I think the answer is, we can't contain it. We're supposed to be more like... reed diffusers.

This week Michael and I have been unpacking. It's sort of like we're experiencing all of the gifts from our wedding again, because some of them we never got to unpack because our space was so small in Dallas. So I came upon this really nice reed diffuser, you know the kind from

Bed, Bath, and Beyond: WoodWick. I registered for it because I knew I would never buy it for myself, but I was really curious to see if it would work. Our house, as some of you may remember smells like old wood and must combined. So I opened up the bottle of the reed diffuser, took off the seal, placed these insignificant pieces of wood inside this oily substance, and said to myself, “This can’t make the whole house smell good between 24 to 36 hours as the instructions claimed. How can these pieces of wood put out the scent of this oil to the whole house?” I was skeptical. But sure enough, in 36 hours our house went from smelling like musty, dusty house to cottonflower. Amazing.

We are those pieces of wood—the reeds that can’t easily be broken. And the oil, is God’s love. We are placed into the oil, we are called to dwell here, and in the process, we begin to diffuse the love all over to a variety of places—to Moldova, to Bruce Drysdale Elementary School, to Interfaith Assistance Ministry. We are filling others and therefore us to the fullness of God. Of course the analogy breaks down because God’s love, unlike the oil is not in a bottle. As I said, it’s immeasurable, uncontainable. That’s good news. We’re not diffusing something small, it’s all around us. You can’t miss it. But you have to step into it, dwell in it, otherwise you’re just a 5 or 6 foot reed, missing out on the big picture. Missing out on the fullness of God and God’s vision for you and for the church.

And finally, Paul and I finish this prayer with a doxology—a word of praise, one I’ve already made mention of: “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, in Providence, and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

How about that for an ending? This dwelling place of love, this place of strengthening is already within us at work—able to do more than we could ever think or imagine. This is a theology of abundance. And I want Providence to be a church that operates out of a theology of abundance.

In our culture and especially our economy you hear words like scarcity, recession, limited resources. But when it comes to God, our vision is not big enough, our dreams are not colorful enough, our ideas not expanded enough, our expectations are not large enough. Where providence dwells, there is abundance.

On my last Sunday at Wilshire, there was a reception line where people came by and spoke blessings to me. Out of all the things said, this one sticks out, “May going to Providence be more than you ever dreamed...” I thought, “Thanks be to God for a blessing like that, not what I heard a lot of which was ‘That first year is tough, or remember to listen, listen, listen, or the learning curve is big at first.’” What a relief and change of paradigm for me to hear “Maybe it will be more than you ever dreamed.”

Most of you think this is scary thinking because we are just setting ourselves up to failure if we think something is greater than we can ask or imagine. You may say, what about prudence? But the truth is prudence and providence always work together to create abundance. This is what God is promising. Let this be the place of all places (if not here, where?) that we expect God to do more than we ask or imagine. And guess what? When we start thinking this way, when we open our eyes to see God working in new ways, we will begin to notice—truly Providence dwells

here. And where Providence is there is strength and power. And where Providence is there is love. And where Providence is there is fullness. And where Providence is there is more than we could ever ask or imagine. Amen.