

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“God is Able”

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### Ephesians 3:14-21

*14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup>from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. <sup>16</sup>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, <sup>17</sup>and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. <sup>18</sup>I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup>and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

*20 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, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.*

This morning I would like to do something a little differently. Instead of looking at the entire Scripture lesson, I would like to concentrate on just one of the verses of the Scripture reading. In verse 29 Paul wrote to the church as Ephesus, “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.” God is able to work within us to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine.

Perhaps you’ve heard the story of Otto. You probably know of someone like Otto. Maybe you are married to Otto. Could it be that Otto is sitting beside you in the pew this morning? Otto was a man who lived as if everything in the world depended on him. Unfortunately, one day he woke up with a high fever. His wife took Otto into an urgent care clinic. The doctor there diagnosed the fever as a case of viral pneumonia. He recommended a few days of bedrest as part of the treatment. Otto responded, “I can’t take any time off work! I have a breakfast meeting with a client. My boss expects a report by noon. I have a telephone regional sales meeting this afternoon. And tonight the church’s Board of Trustees is meeting and my vote is needed. There’s no way I can be sick!” The doctor replied, “No one sir is indispensable. I suggest you follow my orders and stay in bed.”

At that very moment Otto tried to stand but fainted, falling back into a deep dreamlike trance. In the trance he saw heaven and all of the angels gathered around the throne of God. Papers were being passed around and finally one of the angels handed what looked like a very important document to God. God shouted, “Oh, no! It

can't be true. It just can't be!" All the angels in heaven became concerned. The heavenly chorus sang out in unison, "What can it be O God?" God replied, "What on earth will I do today. I've just received word that Otto is sick!"

Perhaps more than any other nation we Americans take pride in our sense of self-reliance. Whether we call it stubborn New England Yankee stubbornness or Western individualism, it is the same kind of spirit. We preach to our children that independence is good and that dependence is something to be frowned upon. One historian notes that in America we seem to prize the self-made man or woman, those who by their own effort pull themselves up by their bootstraps to truly make something of themselves. Certainly there is much to admire in such a spirit. Yet there is also a danger that we may become so impressed with our own efforts and ingenuity that we forget the source of both.

I was standing in line at the store the other day. A woman in front of me was carrying some beautiful roses. When the clerk behind the counter noticed them she said something I found rather strange. She remarked, "Oh, those roses are so beautiful they almost look artificial!" It was quite a switch in logic. Usually we judge the success of something we create by how realistically it matches the real thing. We praise artificial roses that look real. But this was a different standard. Could it be that we are so surrounded by the wonders we have created with our own hands, our own science, and our own knowledge- that we have forgotten that God is the ultimate power and supreme designer? Could it be that we have assumed so much control of our present and our future that our worry and stress and labor have clouded our sense of wonder and awe at the marvel and mystery of "the real thing?"

We might think it to be quite silly to equate our rather limited resources to the remarkable ability of God. Yet in some rather obvious ways, that is exactly what we do. Poet W.H. Auden liked to say, "humans are notorious for grossly overestimating their powers." Our modern psychology tells us that we are ones in control. We all tend to live and use our time as if we are the source of all that happens around us. We worry about creating our own sense of security. We search deep within ourselves for the answers to impossible questions. We work as if the fate of the entire world rested upon our shoulders. We live life as if we have built all things with our own hands and with our own abilities. It is we who are the able ones.

Paul's words to the church at Ephesus speak about human humility and consequently God's ability. In the Scripture lesson this morning Paul presents a doxology, a song of praise to the greatness of God. Paul reminds us that God's ability works according to the power of God that is found within us. And with that power of God in us, God is able to do things beyond our imagination, beyond our carefully devised plans. No matter how able we believe ourselves to be, God is much more able. As followers of God we do not possess God's ability, rather God uses us to accomplish great things.

H. Grady Davis wrote, "The worship of the pagan is search. The worship of the Christian is recognition." We are not to spend our lives searching for knowledge and power. Rather we are to live our lives being something God wants us to be. Our human task is then to get our selfish plans out of God's way and to get our true self in a place where God's way can be accomplished in our words and deeds. It is not up to us to get everything done. It is up to us to allow God to get things done through us.

I think Paul's words are intended to humble us, to make us understand that the power of God is really beyond anything we can claim for ourselves. But I also find this lesson to be empowering. It is good to know that an able God is also a gracious God!

Dr. Leonard Sweet tells a story of growing up poor. He loved to go to church picnics because at such places he had the hope of eating much better than he would at home. Ruth, his mother's best friend always packed one incredible picnic basket. She'd pull it out and spread it on the table. There would be fried chicken, glazed ham, German potato salad, Boston baked beans, homemade bread and butter pickles, German chocolate cake, and Boston cream pie. Leonard's heart leaped with joy when Ruth would turn to his mother and say, "You know, I've got an idea! Why don't we just put your basket with my basket and we'll share our meals. After all, there's plenty of everything and my husband just loves your bologna sandwiches." And so they shared and put it all together. Sweet said that his family came to the picnic like paupers but ate there like kings.

Paul's hymn of praise teaches us that this is essentially what God does for us. God says, "Take what you have and what you are, and I'll take what I have and what I am, and we will put it all together. You don't need to worry about filling up the entire basket with your own recipes and fabulous dishes you have created. And you don't need to worry about starving because you are not able to put much in the basket. Working with and in you, you will have plenty!"

We can not be God. We should not claim to be God. We simply need to be what God created us to be. This ancient affirmation of faith tells us that God is able. God can take what we are and what we have. With the power of God working in us and through us, we can do many things. We have the power to dream big dreams. We have the power to handle life's incredible burdens. We have the power to do far more than we have thought or imagined. Combined with what God is and what God has, there is always more than enough.