

“Abundantly Far More”

“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, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

One of the certificates on the “wall of ego” in my office is for the Departmental Honors that I received when I graduated from university. It was in recognition of the senior honors thesis that I wrote in my last year of school, and is a reminder not only of that accomplishment but of the fact that at first I wanted nothing to do with writing an honors thesis. It was my last year at Ursinus; I had already been accepted into seminary and was looking forward to an easier final year after enduring years of a very rigorous academic regimen. But in the autumn of that year, Dr. Williamson called me into his office and said that I should consider writing a thesis for departmental honors. Having seen the endless hours that some of the students I knew in other classes had spent researching and writing their theses, I was at first very resistant and came up with a litany of excuses as to why I wasn’t the right person to undertake this endeavor. But Dr. Williamson was persistent, believing that I could accomplish *abundantly far more* than I realized; so before I knew it I was assigned a cubicle in the library reserved for thesis writers, and I began the months-long process of research and writing that resulted in the 123-page document that I submitted back in 1979. Dr. Williamson was right; I was indeed able to accomplish *abundantly far more than I could ever ask or imagine*.

A good mentor like Dr. Williamson encourages his proteges to strive to achieve more than they realize they can accomplish. A coach will motivate her players to play to the fullness of their potential, often achieving goals that once appeared impossible. A teacher will motivate his students to go beyond the basic requirements of a course to achieve what none of them thought they could attain. A good mentor can see possibilities that those in their charge cannot, and through constant encouragement and motivation allows them to reach heights that once were unimaginable. We are blessed if we have a person in our lives who gives us the ability to accomplish *abundantly far more than we could ever ask or imagine*.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul functions as a mentor the congregations of Asia Minor who would have heard his circular letter read in worship. In this short but brilliant epistle, Paul proclaims the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ and teaches how Christians are to live and serve in response to all that God has given to us through Christ’s death and resurrection. The Apostles shares this letter so that Christian sin all generations might know that “*we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*” (Ephesians 2:10).

As he concludes the first section of the epistle, Paul offers a prayer for those who will hear these words: “*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.*” (3:14-15). It is a prayer of intercession in which Paul prays that the process of salvation be completed in the hearts and minds of the letter’s recipients, that “*you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.*” (3:16-17). Paul goes on to pray that those who are “rooted and grounded in love” will also be blessed with “*the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*” (3:18-19). Since it is the Apostle who has been entrusted with the commission of God’s grace prays for them, readers of the epistle can be certain that God will grant their request.

- “This is a prayer for the company of believers in the Ephesus church(es). So while each believer needs inner strength, so too does the community. There is a resilience that the whole body requires and for which it must pray.” – Ronald Olson, *Word & World*.

Paul ends his prayer with a doxology, a hymn of praise similar to those found throughout Scripture and in the worship of the church to this day (“*Praise God from whom all blessings flow ...*”). What is unique about this doxology is that it is the only one in the New Testament to mention Christ and the Church as the locus of praise: “... *to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*” (3:21). Paul praises God for what God will accomplish through the Church that has been empowered by the Holy Spirit and by the “*love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.*” Through this power of God that is at work within the life of the Church, Paul gives praise to God who will accomplish “*abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine*” (3:20). It is a fitting conclusion for a prayer that is “*for the church to enjoy to the fullest extent possible the living power of God, Christ’s love.*” (Olson).

It helps us to remember that Paul’s words are written to a first-century church that was often marginalized and oppressed by the society in which it lived. Paul acknowledges the “inferiority complex” that afflicted many churches in the opening chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians:

- “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” – 1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

The Church that bears the name of Christ is established by one who was also not of noble birth, born in a humble manger, who called disciples from similar stations in life to be the one who would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Despite their backgrounds or level of confidence, all who are called by Christ share the confidence that they can truly accomplish abundantly far more than they could ever ask or imagine because what they are accomplishing is not through their own power but through the power of Christ working through them to accomplish God’s Will. Paul’s confidence is shared by all who are called to bear Christ’s love to others: “*I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me.*” (Philippians 4:13).

This ability to accomplish all things through the strengthening presence of Christ is seen in today’s Gospel lesson, John’s account of the feeding of the Five Thousand – the only miracle story found in all four Gospels. A large crowd has followed Jesus to the shores of the Sea of Galilee “*because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick*” (John 6:2), similar to responses to Jesus’ other “signs” (the word John uses for miracles) earlier in the Fourth Gospel when “*many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing*” (2:23). The miracle is initiated by Jesus; as he initiated contact with the Samaritan woman (4:9) and initiated the healing of the man by the pool (5:6), so here Jesus anticipates the hunger of the crowd. But in a surprising move, he turns to his disciple Philip and asks him “*where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?*” (6:5). John informs us that this question is meant to test Philip, “*for he himself knew what he was going to do*” (6:6); but to Philip, this appears to be an impossible dilemma: “*Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.*” (6:8). Philip’s fellow disciple Andrew comes to his assistance, pointing to a boy who has brought along five barley loaves and two fish; but Andrew also does not see a solution to this problem, for “*what are they among so many people?*” (6:9). Both Philip and Andrew see only a situation which they cannot resolve by their own abilities, failing to realize that they are in the presence of the one through whose empowerment they will be able to accomplish “*abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,*” because if one knows the source of Jesus’ gifts, one comes close to recognizing Jesus’ identity.

- “The disciples’ answers show how traditional categories cannot comprehend in advance what Jesus has to give. Conventional expectations offer no solutions to the crowd’s needs; Jesus alone knows how to meet their needs.” – Gail O’Day.

On the wall next to this departmental honors certificate hangs my ordination certificate from that hot June day 35 years ago. As I continue to give thanks for your incredible generosity in our celebration of this milestone, I have been thinking back over the years about what has happened in the course of my ordained ministry; and indeed, what has happened it truly abundantly far more than I ever could have asked or imagined. As I give thanks for all of the blessings that have been a part of my years of service as a pastor, I am fully aware that it was truly God’s presence and God’s empowerment that has allowed all of these things to take place; I know that by my own understanding or strength I could have accomplished little, but through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit I have witnessed God’s Will be accomplished among the people I was called to serve.

The possibility of bearing witness to God accomplishing abundantly far more than we could ask or imagine is present for all who us who in Holy Baptism were reborn children of God and blessed with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit: *“the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever.”* (ELW Holy Baptism). Because each of us is called in baptism to *“serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus”* (ELW Affirmation of Baptism), each of us is sent forth through the call of Christ and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit so that we might also be the vessels through which God will accomplish abundantly far more than we could imagine on our own.

- “The charge to the community lies in the calling of believers through Christ to the kingdom of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. This charge is made visible through the sign of baptism. The community of the baptized is the community of those who are called ... It is the prophetic people which through its life and style of that life bears witness before the world to God’s promise and its future.” – Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*.

I’ve kept both this thesis and the certificate I received for it not because it’s the greatest thesis ever written (I’m sure I could do a much better job now than I did 39 years ago), but because it reminds me of what was made possible when somebody believed in me and encouraged and motivated me to accomplish far more than I ever imagined I could have. For all of us, the words of the Apostle are similar words of encouragement – not because of what we might be capable of doing, but because of the one who has called and empowered us. As the Church of Jesus Christ, we have been called, gathered, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and sent forth to be the embodiment of Christ’s love here at home and throughout the world. Because this is Christ’s Church, and because we have our Lord’s assurance that God’s Holy Word *“shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”* (Isaiah 55:11). The Church of Jesus Christ – all of us who bear Christ’ holy name – can and will *“accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,”* to God be the glory! Amen.