

## BEYOND COMPREHENSION

Ephesians 3:14-21

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

July 29, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, chapter 3, verses 14 through 21. It is on page 828 of the pew Bible. In this epistle lesson, Paul finds himself teaching what is beyond all human comprehension, and it drives him to praise. Please stand as you are able for the epistle lesson. From Ephesians 3, beginning at verse 21, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>14</sup>For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup>from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, <sup>16</sup>that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup>so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, <sup>18</sup>may have strength 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, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

<sup>20</sup>Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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How do you explain the unexplainable? How do you express what cannot be comprehended?

For example, how would you explain the beauty of a prairie sunset to someone who's never seen one? How would you describe the Rocky Mountains to someone who's never left the Red River Valley or even looked at the pictures? Or how would you describe the beauty of the Red River Valley to someone who's never left the mountains? How do you describe something new to someone when they've never experienced anything like it? It's kind of difficult. But what if you've never experienced it either? Then it's even more difficult. Imagine trying to describe the beauty of the mountains or the smell of the ocean when you've never experienced those things. You've only heard of them. At some point you just say, "Trust me; it's awesome."

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That's actually kind of like what the Biblical writers do. They describe someone they've never seen. They teach something that's beyond comprehension, even for them. Now it certainly helps that they're inspired by the Holy Spirit. That brings a remarkable accuracy and consistency to the Bible. Imagine the confusion if you had forty different authors writing sixty-six books over the course of 1,500 years all about something that none of them completely comprehend. It would just be a bunch of people spouting their random opinions about God,

and it would be chaos. Without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we would have massive confusion.

But here's the thing: God wants to be known. He wants you to know him. He wants you to understand him. He even wants you to comprehend what cannot be comprehended. He wants you "to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (3:19). So we might not be able to understand; we might not be able to comprehend. But God is capable of making himself known, and that's what he does.

So agnostics—that is, people who don't believe it's possible to know whether or not God exists or anything about him—they're not quite atheists, because they won't say that God is not real; they simply say that we can't know—they're actually onto something. They are right when they assert that human beings are incapable of knowing God. They are right about that. But knowledge of God doesn't really depend on our ability to comprehend; it depends on God's ability to reveal himself. We might not be able to understand; we might not be able to comprehend. But God is capable of making himself known, and that's what he does. So God reveals himself to us. He doesn't reveal everything to us, but he reveals what he wants us to know. There are still secrets about God, but he has revealed the mysteries.

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I heard another preacher describe the difference between a mystery and a secret. I don't remember who it was now, but he said, "When a secret is revealed, it's not a secret anymore. But when a mystery is revealed, it can still be a mystery." So when God reveals the mysteries about himself, the thing he wants us to know is known, but it still remains mysterious to us. It still lies beyond our ability to comprehend. We know the mystery, but we can't really fathom it.

And I think this distinction helps us understand the way Paul talks about mysteries in the book of Ephesians. In the passage before this, Paul talks about "the mystery of Christ" (3:4), which is "that the Gentiles are fellow heirs" (3:6). This mystery is about how God has redeemed all of humanity and united both Jews and Gentiles into one body—the body of Christ. God revealed this mystery. We know that he has done this, but there are things that still lie beyond our grasp, and all we can do is marvel at them—kind of like the way you can't really describe a sunset, but you can marvel at it. And I suppose if you do some research you can figure out why a sunset looks the way it does. You can figure out the science behind it. But even when the secrets of the sunset are revealed, it's still mysterious and you still marvel at it. Instead of becoming bored by sunsets, knowing the mystery of it will only cause you to marvel even more. And the same thing happens with God when we begin to understand the mysteries. Instead of becoming bored because we know the secret—that's the sort of thing that happens when an illusionist reveals the secret of his trick—when the mysteries of God are revealed to us, we marvel even more.

That's why Paul bows his knees. Right before the text for today, Paul was explaining "the mystery of Christ," which is "that the Gentiles are fellow heirs." And this mystery moves him to "bow [his] knees before the Father" (3:14). That's the result of good doctrine. When the truth of God is revealed, it leads us to "worship Him with prayer, praise, and thanksgiving" (Luther's *Small Catechism*, "The Second Commandment").

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Last week someone mentioned the relationship between theology and doxology. Theology is the truth about God. Another word for it is "doctrine." It's the description of God—who he is

and what he does. It's the plain facts about his nature and his actions. That's theology. And doxology literally means "word of glory." It's the praise of God. A great example of it is verses 20 and 21: "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (3:20-21) That's a classic example of a doxology. And it comes about as the natural result of theology. If theology doesn't move us to doxology—that is, if Christian doctrine doesn't inspire us to glorify God—there's something wrong. Maybe it means there's something wrong with our doctrine. If our doctrine doesn't reveal God to be immeasurably glorious and gracious, there's something wrong. Or maybe there's something wrong with the teacher. If the preacher or teacher treats it merely as an academic exercise, there's something wrong with him. Or it might be a problem with the hearers. It may be a matter of unbelief, where we don't really accept what is taught about God, or it may be a matter of becoming desensitized to it. Sometimes we actually have to say to ourselves, *Well, I don't feel very moved by this doctrine anymore, but God is worthy of praise, so I'm going to sing "Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow" anyway.* Sometimes we have to do that, because that is the appropriate thing to do.

But, at least sometimes, theology naturally inspires us to speak or sing doxology. In heaven it will work perfectly because we will understand God rightly, and there won't be any sin in us to prevent the natural reaction of doxology. But here on earth it only sometimes works right. We see it working right in *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*. He's been teaching doctrine, and all of the sudden he breaks into doxology. He just has to praise God for his glorious and gracious work.

There comes a point in the study of theology where you learn what you're supposed to learn, but you also come to the realization that the revelation of God is still beyond our comprehension. It's that point where the mystery is revealed, but it's still mysterious. And I think that's the point—or at least one of the points—where doxology naturally flows. It's that point where we get it, but we still don't. We're overwhelmed by what is still beyond comprehension.

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And Paul mentions four things here that are beyond our comprehension.

The first is the fatherhood of God and its relationship to every earthly family. Every family in heaven and on earth is named after the fatherhood of God (3:15). And I think sometimes we get this backward. Sometimes we start with our own experience of having a father—whether that father is good, bad, or absent—and we project that image of a father onto God. But that's the wrong way to think about it. Instead we should realize that the fatherhood of God is the pattern for all earthly families—not just dads, but also moms—and that every earthly family is an *imperfect* reflection of God's fatherhood. When parents are good by earthly standards, they are a partial and imperfect reflection of God's perfect fatherhood. When parents are bad, they are more of a distortion of the pattern God set. But remember that, at best, parents reflect a mere fraction of our heavenly father's goodness, mercy, and power.

So when you think about your own parents, maybe you have good thoughts, maybe you have bad thoughts, or maybe it's a mixture. If your experience of your parents is good, think of that as just a dim reflection of God's ultimate fatherhood. The fullness of God's fatherhood is still beyond our comprehension. And if your experience of your parents is bad, think of that as a

contrast to God's fatherhood. Your Father in heaven is much better. He is much more loving, and tender, and merciful. And the evil of bad parents is still a mere fraction compared to the goodness of God's fatherhood. Our Father in heaven is the pattern. Our earthly parents a dim reflection. So the fullness of God's fatherhood is still beyond our comprehension. He is more powerful than we can comprehend. He is more merciful than we can fathom. And he is better than we can ever imagine. He has revealed the concept of his fatherhood to us, but it still lies beyond our comprehension.

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The second thing that lies beyond our comprehension is God's nature. Paul prays for the readers in Ephesus—and we can include all Christians in this—he prays for us “to be strengthened with power through his Spirit [in] our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith—that [we], being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth” (3:16-18).

The thing about God is that he's infinite, and infinity lies beyond our grasp. We know powerful people, but God's power is infinite. We know smart people, but God's knowledge is infinite. We know good people, but God's goodness is infinite. Our experience and our comprehension is limited to things that can be measured, but God cannot be measured, so it takes a bit of divine intervention to be able to even begin to comprehend “the breadth and length and height and depth” of God's nature. But that is what God grants, and when we begin to fathom what cannot be fathomed, we are led to doxology—to speak or sing God's praise.

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The third thing that lies beyond our comprehension is the love of Christ. Paul prays that we would “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (3:19). Just stop and let that sink in. His prayer is that we would know something that lies beyond knowledge. It's a love that this world does not know. It's a kind of love that can only occur when someone beyond this world condescends to us and loves us greater than we can love. It's the kind of love that we don't know and cannot even begin to comprehend until it comes to us. It's the love of God manifested on the cross of Jesus Christ.

And I think this might be the most incomprehensible part of theology. From nature we can see that God exists and must be really powerful. From watching sunsets and looking at mountains we can see that God must care about beauty. From observing natural law we can discern that God cares about justice and order. There are many aspects of God's nature that his creation clues us in on. But nothing in the created order teaches us that God would love us by taking on our frail and dying flesh. Nothing in the created order teaches us that he would bear the shame and guilt for all our misdeeds. Nothing in all we see and observe in the world around us would lead us to think that he would love us by dying for us. It's totally unexpected, and it's a love that lies beyond our comprehension, because no other love we see or experience comes close to this kind of love. So it's not something that we learn just by observing the world. It has to be revealed to us, and it is most unexpected.

In fact, the more we come to understand God's justice and holiness, and the more we come to realize our own sinful depravity, the more unexpected and incomprehensible his love becomes. So every part of theology—even the part that teaches us how bad we are—leads to doxology. We praise and magnify God, not so much because he is powerful and awesome and worthy of praise. Those are fine reasons to praise him. But we praise and magnify God because

this powerful and awesome God clothed himself in weakness and shame in order to rescue weak and shameful and undeserving sinners like you and me. Why exactly he would do this—why he would decide to bear the curse of what we have done—is beyond comprehension. For a God who creates simply by speaking, it seems like it would be easier and far less painful to just wipe this creation away and speak a new one into existence—one without sin and death. That would seem easier and far less painful. But the defining characteristic of God—the one that stands out far above all his other attributes—is his love. It’s a love that surpasses knowledge. It’s a love beyond any other love we know or experience. It’s a love that fills us with joy because it is for us. But it also leaves us wondering why. The love of God, manifested through the cross of Jesus Christ, is the most glorious aspect of God, and it is far beyond comprehension.

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And the fourth thing that lies beyond comprehension is God’s answer to our prayers. In the doxology of this passage, Paul praises “him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.” And this kind of brings us back around to the idea of God as the perfect pattern for all parenthood.

Children ask their parents for all sorts of things. And this is a good picture of prayer. Sometimes a child asks for something small, but the parent gives something big instead, like when a child gets hungry and asks for a snack, but the parent serves dinner instead. Or sometimes children ask for what they want and what they think will be good for them—like a chainsaw—but parents might know better what is good for their children, so they give them the better thing—like a bicycle—instead of a chainsaw. And sometimes children don’t even know what to ask for. They just know something is wrong, so they complain. And the parent is able to figure out if the child has a fever or is overtired or something else, and the parent gives what the child needs without the child ever figuring out the problem. And sometimes children never even think to ask for what they need, because their parents are giving it to them already, like clothing or a roof over their heads. Parents are constantly doing far more abundantly than all that their children ask or think.

Now if this is true for earthly parents, how much more must it be true for our Father in heaven who is the pattern for all earthly parents? We ask him to forgive our sins, and he has already given his only Son to do just that. We ask him for little things, but “**it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom**” (Luke 12:32). When we or our loved ones get sick, we ask God to heal, but God has already promised and already determined that he will raise us from the dead, heal all our diseases, transform our bodies, and give us incorruptible eternal life after the pattern of Jesus Christ, who “is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity” (*Small Catechism*, “The Second Article”). Compare the sorts of things we ask for with the things God has already promised to give us. God “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.”

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So we praise God. The father’s love is beyond all human comprehension. The love of Christ surpasses all knowledge. And the Holy Spirit works in our hearts and minds that we might begin to comprehend this God who is beyond all human comprehension. “To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

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BEYOND COMPREHENSION (Ephesians 3:14-21)

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.