

Pentecost 10, Year B (RCL)  
July 28, 2024  
New Song Church  
Jane Stewart

2 Kings 4:42-44  
Psalm 145:10-19  
Ephesians 3:14-21  
John 6:1-21

## Gobsmacked by God

I am not a person who remembers pithy quotes from sermons that I've heard or books that I've read. I am in awe of people for whom this skill seems to come naturally and easily. I have other gifts, but pulling quotes out of the tangled recesses of my brain is not one of them and it never has been. I'm telling you this in the hope that it can help you understand just how remarkable it is when I AM able to quote something – especially something that I read 45 years ago for a religion class in college. A quote from Annie Dillard's book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* was so impactful for me that it has stuck with me all these years despite its less-than-inclusive language. The quote, that I have likely quoted to you before in some other sermon, is this:

*We “can catch grace as a man fills his cup under a waterfall.”<sup>i</sup>*

Reading that single line left 22-year-old me feeling gobsmacked by God's grace, and it is a feeling that has never let me go. It has helped form my faith and has been instrumental in shaping my ministry. It is such an over-the-top metaphor. And so apt. A cup! Under a waterfall! My response then and now was “WOW!” and “Thank You”!

And this was the quote that came immediately to my mind as I was preparing this sermon on today's lesson from Ephesians.

Hold that thought while I take a brief detour here to provide a fun fact for your day: scholars believe that the book of Ephesians, often referred to as Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, was most likely not written by Paul, isn't really a letter, and probably wasn't written to the Ephesians. There is quite convincing evidence that the language, style, and content of Ephesians has little in common with the so-called "undisputed letters of Paul" – Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. In each of Paul's undisputed letters he greets various leaders of the local congregations, but even though we know that Paul actually lived in Ephesus for a couple of years, he doesn't greet anyone by name. Ephesians lacks the personal touches of a Pauline letter. Rather than a letter, it is believed to be more like a sermon or theological tract that may have been circulated to Gentiles in any number of different towns, Ephesus perhaps being one of them.

Today's passage represents a pivot point in the book of Ephesians. The first half lets Gentiles know that they too have received God's gift of grace and salvation through Jesus Christ. The second half offers believers practical advice on how they can "live a life worthy of the calling" to which they have been called – a theme that is introduced in the verse immediately following our passage. Today's text provides a transition from the theological understanding laid out in the first half, to the practical advice offered in the second half. And it comes in the form of a prayer.

The author prays for four things:

- that believers, ALL believers, so that includes us, will be strengthened in our inner being by the power of the Spirit
- that we be rooted and grounded in love because Christ lives in us
- that we might have some small sense of the vastness of God's glory
- that we will know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge so that we might be filled with the fullness of God

And all of this, “because of the riches of God's glory.” Our God is a God of unimaginable goodness and abundance. Abundance, grace, love, so high, so deep, and so broad, that our rational brains can't begin to grasp it. But that doesn't mean that it is lost to us, because the author of Ephesians says that there is another sense of “knowing” that doesn't depend on our understanding. It is feeling in our soul that which we cannot articulate. It is being so rooted and grounded in God's love that we find it spilling out of ourselves and into the world. It is opening our eyes in wonder as we experience the beauty of creation. It is filling our cups under a waterfall of God's grace. It is being gobsmacked by God.

Of course, God's waterfall of grace is not the only powerful force at work in our world. We are flooded with grief and anxiety every time we hear the latest news. Another black woman has been killed by police in her own home, Palestinian children are dying of starvation in Gaza and Israeli children are killed by rocket fire while playing soccer. In our own country, the political rhetoric has become even more vicious in the past week since President Biden's endorsement of Kamala Harris for president. Meanwhile, Project 2025 looms over us like a terrifying specter.

This prayer from Ephesians reminds us that God's immeasurable goodness exceeds our greatest fears. We are grounded in Christ's love, strengthened by God's Spirit, and filled with the richness of God's grace.

The Rev. Katherine Bush, a priest in Memphis, TN, writes in a blog post, that despite all that is wrong with the world, "Annie Dillard is here to remind us that there is also a waterfall of beauty and love and reasons for hope. It is spilling over us, and we would do our best to grab a cup and notice the good. To sip even a few drops can quench our thirst for wonder and delight."

Bush adds, "Friends, this is not a Pollyanna post. I am not suggesting that we bury our heads in the sand. I am suggesting that we not ignore the stories of hope, the funny jokes, the rest stops where we can put our feet up for a bit, and the small kindnesses offered all the time by friend and stranger alike. God's grace is abundant, flooding even this broken world and these bewildering days. Mercy and forgiveness show up and release us back out into the world with freedom and joy."

Today's text closes with a beautiful benediction that is filled with hope and promise. "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."

Following the example of the author of Ephesians, I'd like to share my own prayers for each of us and for New Song.

- First, I pray that whatever is going on within or around us, we will know in our hearts that God is in the midst of it.

- I pray that we will let love be our source and our guide in all that we do and say,
- That we will both experience and share God's goodness,
- That we will continue to provide a place of solace, community, and renewed hope for spiritual refugees,
- That we will be peace-bearers in a world that breeds violence
- That we will follow Jesus's example in feeding the poor, caring for the hurting, and welcoming the stranger.

But above all, my prayer is that each of us will be gobsmacked by God. The rest will follow.

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<sup>i</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.