

ARE WE BUILDING BEYOND MEASURE?

Ephesians 3

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Pastor Vern Christopherson

We've been working our way through Ephesians and asking questions as we go:

Chapter 1: Are we building in love?

Chapter 2: Are we building without walls?

And now, chapter 3: Are we building beyond measure? Whatever else it might mean, building beyond measure has a lot to do with the size of our God and what God might want to accomplish through us.

Can we ever fully imagine what God has in store for us? I mean, the good news of Jesus can get very personal. It can affect who we are and how we think and what we do with our lives. Sometimes we become the center of the story.

I loved playing basketball when I was growing up. I went to college hoping to become a teacher and a basketball coach. I wasn't absolutely sure about it—on a scale of 1-10, I was about a "6" or a "7"—but I jumped in anyway. All I knew for sure was that I was *not* going to become a pastor. My dad was a pastor. I'd seen what he did. And that was not for me.

While in college, I played a lot of pick-up basketball games in the gym. It was my home away from home. Invariably the teams would be "shirts" and "skins" to help us keep track of who was on which team. One of my first days in the gym, I was on the "skin" team. I was playing next to a young man from Africa named Mawenzi. Growing up in South Dakota, I don't think I'd ever seen a black person before, at least not up close. Now one of them was on my team.

As the game went along, the "shirts" found themselves needing another player. They picked Mawenzi. But there was a problem: he didn't have a basketball shirt, so he grabbed mine. The game went on. We played hard and perspired much. When the game was over, Mawenzi handed me back my shirt. Instantly I had a visceral reaction. I wasn't sure if I could put it on. Besides the sweat, you see, there was this issue of him being black. A part of me, a subconscious part, was worried that the black might rub off.

Who could have imagined what would happen to me along the way? I eventually became friends with Mawenzi. I learned that his color doesn't rub off. I learned that in many ways he was just like me. Who could have imagined that God had ideas in store for me other than being a basketball coach? Who could have imagined that I would someday get a call to Rochester and serve a church with a Sudanese congregation? Who could have imagined that I would be leading a mission trip to Tanzania this coming January?

Life is almost too much to imagine at times, isn't it? It's full of surprises. About I can say is this: *All glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or imagine* (Ephesians 3:20).

In Ephesians 3 the Apostle Paul is the center of the story. As you may know, Paul had strong Jewish roots. He wrote to the Philippians with pride: “I was circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

Paul’s heritage was his badge of honor. It involved strict adherence to the law, fierce loyalty to the traditions of his ancestors, and—let’s not forget—rigid separation from the Gentiles. Since the rabbi named Jesus didn’t fit his understanding of the Messiah, Paul opposed him and his followers at every turn. The book of Acts pictures Paul tracking down Christians and arresting them, all the way to Damascus.

Who could have imagined that Paul would be struck down by a blinding light on the road to Damascus? Who could have imagined that he would open his heart—or maybe better, that God would open it for him—and that Paul would become a follower of Jesus? Who could have imagined that Paul would someday reach out to the very people he once despised? Verse 8 of chapter 3: *God gave me the privilege of telling the Gentiles about the endless treasures available to them in Christ.*

Life is almost too much to imagine at times, isn’t it? It’s full of surprises. About all Paul could say is this: *All glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or imagine.*

Friends, sometimes we are the center of the story. Whether it’s a dream to go into coaching or a trip to Damascus to track down Christians, sometimes God has other plans for us. That shouldn’t surprise us. The Bible we believe in is not some theoretical book about people long ago and far away. No, it’s about people like you and me. The good news of Jesus can get very personal. It can affect who we are and how we think and what we do with our lives. God has a habit of tapping people on the shoulder and saying: “I’ve got something I want you to consider. And by the way, it’s probably not going to be easy.”

This year at Zumbro we’ve been *creating a place for all to belong*. God came along, tapped a bunch of shy Lutherans on the shoulder and said, “I want you to really work on being a downtown church. I want you to welcome everyone.” Some weeks this focus has been incredibly fun...such as when we served casseroles to the new Luther College students. But other weeks it’s been downright challenging...such as when we started passing out gas cards and food cards to people off the street and ended up with a deluge at our door. Let’s be honest: sometimes the folks who show up in our lives aren’t all that convenient...or likeable...or deserving. What do we do then? God never said it was going to be easy.

It couldn’t have been easy for Paul, either. God asked him to reach out to the least convenient, least likable, least deserving people Paul could think of—the Gentiles. As Paul saw it, God’s plan was to love the Jews—they were God’s special people. But one

day God tapped Paul on the shoulder. And by the time the apostle arrived in Ephesus, he was singing a completely different tune. Verse 6: *This is God's plan: Both Gentiles and Jews who believe the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God's children.*

Did you hear that? In this new family God is creating, everything is even-steven. If it's hard to feel the sting in Paul's words, allow me make an analogy. Suppose you're living in a family. Your dad has made out a will. There is quite a bit of money to pass along to you and your siblings. A few years pass by. Your mother dies. Things get more complicated. Then late last year your dad remarries. Things get more complicated still. Now you have step-brothers and step-sisters...and you're not sure if you're all that fond of them. But the real shocker is this: one day your dad announces he's redoing his will; and he's going to give the same amount to step-siblings as he's giving to you.

That's what Paul is saying here. It was God's plan from the very beginning to include the Gentiles. It was God's plan to give them a share equal to the Jews. And more than that, it was God's plan for the church to be a place where the wall of hostility between these two groups—the wall Jesus dismantled on the cross—comes crashing down. God never said it was going to be easy.

Remember, this is not just a story about people long ago and far away. Sometimes *we* are the center of the story. Sometimes *we* are the ones with walls that need to come down. Sometimes *we* know people who aren't particularly convenient or likable or deserving. What do we do?

Paul seems to anticipate the challenges we will face. He prays for us in verse 16: I pray that *God will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit.* I pray that *Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him.* I pray that *your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong.*

We can use this prayer. Breaking down walls is not easy work. *Creating a place for all to belong* will stretch us at every turn. If we ever hope to do it well, we're going to need roots that grow down into God's love. It's a love that is wide and long and high and deep—with room for everyone. It's a love dependable enough to sustain us on our darkest days. It's a love powerful enough to transform even the most stubborn of hearts. It's a love that can open our eyes to see the pain of this world and then give us the courage to do something about it. Quite simply, it's a love beyond measure.

I saw a glimpse of God's immeasurable love this past week. Jane Applen-Anderson of Zumbro was in the hospital. Jane had been waiting for a new kidney and pancreas for almost three years. She'd had lots of ups and down during that time. She'd had days and weeks when she wondered if the transplants were ever going to happen. Then late last Monday afternoon she got a phone call—a donor had been found. By Tuesday morning she was in surgery. By Tuesday afternoon the transplants were done.

Later in the week I visited with Jane and her husband, Steve. She was noticeably tired. But she was grinning from ear to ear. Her new pancreas was working fine. And she'd

just gotten the news that her new kidney was working too. Jane was grateful and humble and euphoric, all at the same time. She said her heart was full of love, love for the donor, love for the donor's family, love for the doctors, love for her husband, love for her friends, and most of all, love for God. As much as is humanly possible, Jane's love was a love beyond measure.

Who could have imagined that Jane would become a diabetic at age seven? Who could have imagined that her kidneys would start to fail and she would need to go on a transplant list? Who could have imagined that this week, after three long years, she would receive the most incredible gift of life?

Can we ever fully imagine what God has in store for us? The good news of Jesus can get very personal. It can—and should—affect who we are and how we think and what we do with our lives. Sometimes we become the center of the story, this incredible story of a love that knows no bounds.

Oh, life is full of surprises. At the end of the day, about all we can say is this: *All glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or imagine.* Amen.