

The End of Ordinary Time *(or When We Haven't Got a Prayer)* *Ephesians 3:14-21*

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By the reckoning of the liturgical year, we are in ordinary time. Odd, isn't it, that the season that begins with the fiery renewal of Pentecost should be designated "ordinary." By the reckoning of the church in North America, there is little that is ordinary about this moment, unless ordinary means that we have become accustomed to declining attendance, decreasing budgets, church fights, denominational struggles, and diminished hope.

The typical established congregation of most any theological stripe can feel mocked by a living memory of full pews and anticipation of ongoing stability and growth based on a Christian majority opinion that not too long ago seemed to be shared in the public as well as private spheres.

If the internal angst is not enough, the external environment, particularly in social media, has become increasingly hostile toward Christian faith. A rise in fashionable atheism is answered variously by different streams of the church, some in stammering silence that nears acquiescence, while others offer a militant rear guard action of tired apologetics and legal maneuvering aimed at "re-taking our culture for God."

Those who study the mission and history of the church declare that we are well into Post-Christendom. Christendom, that longstanding alliance between the power structures of western society and the church, in which the church was viewed as an essential institution for improving personal morality and insuring that God was on our side in all matters of national importance. In the United States, it was only official in a few experiments during the colonial period. But while the church was never officially established or monolithic in America, the wide array of Christian denominations came to enjoy a de facto establishment favored by law and convention. The church grew large, divided, and unimaginative, giving its attention to management. While denominations competed with one another for primacy, there were enough members to go around to keep most churches established and growing.

The decline set in almost imperceptibly at first, then gaining speed coming close, some claim already passing, to a tipping point. Desperate attempts have been made to staunch the loss of members and return to the former days. But this is Post, after, Christendom. The way forward will not be a return to the recent past. The environment has been inoculated and become resistant to these recovery strategies. There will be no easy return to recent past or even continued existence in ordinary time.

But post-Pentecost is anything but ordinary time. Pentecost, that moment when the fire-breathing God breathed out the animating breath of life dismissing religious priorities of structure, order, and management for the work breaking down walls of hostility; restructuring relationships so that they would no longer be Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; re-ordering economics, remembering old priorities for the widow, the orphan and the alien; and birthing the church into the life of the Messiah who had, in his hometown sermon, declared that it is for this purpose that the

Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and it is fulfilled in your hearing.

The church shaped by the ordinariness of Christendom lost the imagination and the memory of how to exist within a hostile society. Odd isn't it that all of the New Testament documents, from gospels to epistles to Revelation, are the testimony and documents of an illegal religion in a hostile environment. These ancient texts better understand the world we have entered in western society than we do ourselves.

Today's epistle reading, coming from within decades after Pentecost, offers a formative prayer for a church in a hostile environment. And let us remember that it is a prayer for the church; it is not some nebulous personal spirituality, but a prayer that invites us to be formed personally and communally for the purpose of God.

It begins with words that are hard to utter: *"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name."* In a world that summoned all to bow the knee before the genius of Caesar, the apostle prays, "I bow my knees before the Father." In many places and for some good reasons we stumble over this word *Father*. The subject of patriarchy and paternalism must wait for another day. But for this moment let us see how this prayer answers Imperial claims with familial claims. Conquest and forced pacification that have generated Pax Romana are not worthy of our worship.

No, the wisdom and the hope of the cosmos before whom you and I are invited to bow is not the conqueror who employs the cross, but the common parent of all humanity. When I bow, I acknowledge that this God has named all families. Therefore in bowing I open myself to a kinship for which I will need to be transformed from my habits of thinking about the other as other.

But even as we would dare to pray these words, I know far too well my impotence to fix relationships, to overcome animosities, and to make people get along. It is not within me, no matter how hard I try. The apostle understands this, and so after bowing, after yielding, he teaches us to ask for the only power that can accomplish this: *"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, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love."* The church after Pentecost has learned its need and so risks praying a prayer that will make the pray-er different. That the pray-ers all will understand that to host this power of the Spirit, to welcome this indwelling Christ, is to be formed by and for love.

Then, just when we dare think we may have it, we have seized the idea, we possess the truth and can now tell others what they need to do, the apostle goes on: *"I pray that you may have 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."*

To know the love of God that surpasses knowledge. The prayer is a confession; this love that we seek to know is beyond our knowing. Our best apprehension of it is partial. The moment we think we have grasped it so we can use it, we are reminded that "the love of Christ surpasses knowledge." In your conflicts, yes, your conflicts in the church, when you, I, we are ready to demonize the other, to declare that love has its limits, we are here formed in prayer to confess; we are called to ever pursue a love that is beyond our knowing, beyond our controlling. We are called not to manage this love, not to parcel it out, but to be relentless in our prayer to see it.

Of this love, we know only its source and its cruciform revelation in Christ, the One who declared the gospel of peace not as an ethical mandate, but the very fruit of the crucifixion. The One who breached the wall of hostility that runs through our own hearts and minds, that divides nation, race, clan, religion, social status, and gender. So we bow, so we pray to receive, so we confess how imperfect and partial is our love. In bowing, we yield to be remade by and for love by the same power that raised Christ from the dead.

Around the year 197, the Christian theologian and apologist Tertullian wrote of the pagan perception of the Christians — “*But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See, they say, how they love one another.... See, they say about us, how they are ready even to die for one another...*” (*Apology*).

The church of post-Christendom doesn’t have a prayer. But the church of post-Pentecost does! Let us then so pray to be made and remade by and for love. And then all that remains—all that can remain—is doxology.