

Ephesians 1:16-23. ¹⁶I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, ²⁰which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²²And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

We are connected

Connected to each other

Connected to Christ

You are the body of Christ. On any given Sunday, a pastor can stand before his parish and speak these words. On a night where we come together from four separate congregations and have visitors from still other congregations with us, it is an especially useful and blessed reminder. We are the body of Christ. Our Ascended Lord Jesus may no longer dwell physically here on this earth, but he lives among us still. As members of the Church of God we are members of the body of Christ and our risen and Ascended Lord is the Head. And where the Head is so shall we be. The Lord who dwells with us now, will dwell with us forever in heaven. Jesus is the Head we are the body.

The Apostle Paul uses this imagery of the body of Christ in a number of his letters including here in Ephesians, Romans, and 1 Corinthians. There is a wonderful connection that we have as Christians. We are the body of Christ. We are united to each other. We serve alongside one another. We each have different gifts and we use them to carry out the work and will of God as members of his church. The members of God's Church, the members of the body of Christ are united in faith, in hope, in purpose, and mission. We are united in Christ.

Paul celebrates that connection that he has with the members of the Ephesian congregation as he launches into this heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving. He had spent nearly three years in their midst and now he had an opportunity to reconnect with the members of this particular congregation. Add to that the fact that Paul had received reports about the love and good deeds that were being produced because of the faith in

Christ that these believers had been given, and it all led Paul rejoice in the work that was being done by believers, by the body of Christ. He writes joyfully, ¹⁶***I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*** Paul begins, and we see how he keeps going with great excitement and joy, (especially in the original language as this all one sentence) as the words pours out from his heart onto the page. Even though Paul writes this letter from more than a few towns away, he celebrates the bond and connection that he shares with these believers and he earnestly includes these believers in his prayers.

That same bond that Paul shared with Ephesians we too have the privilege to share with each other. The pastors who serve this area have all been here for a while. I have been here the shortest period of time and that time is already approaching 9 years. That time has allowed me to get to know not only the people in the congregations that I have been specifically called to serve, but also to get to know the names and faces and even some of the talents and blessings and challenges that go along with God's people in this extended area of believers. And as the years have moved along we have pulled together more frequently and more deliberately to serve and act as the body of Christ. I give thanks for the work that we have done together. I look forward with anticipation as I consider what the LORD may have in store for us down the road. The pastors and members of Zion and St. John's as well as the members of St. Matthew's Danube and St. Matthew Flora Twp are often remembered in my prayers and I am sure the same goes for the other pastors as well.

As we give thanks for the fellowship we share and pray for each other, Paul's words serve as good counsel and wonderful reminder of what those prayers ought to look like. Not only did Paul pray that God would bless the work done as the body of Christ, but he prayed with the spiritual-well-being and spiritual growth of individual members on his heart and mind. Yes, there was reason to rejoice in the reports of love and good deeds among the Ephesians, but Paul prayed that things would continue and that most importantly that each believer in Ephesus would grow in their faith. ¹⁷***I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.***

Yes, there is reason to rejoice as we give reports of the love and good deeds and joint ministries that are taking place among us, but there remains this on-going prayer that this continues. And there also remains the continuing need for which we ought to pray: that the individuals among our congregations would grow in their faith. Each and every one of us needs to continue to grow in the knowledge of the LORD Jesus, in the knowledge of the Scriptures, and grow in faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. Pray that God would grant such spiritual growth among us.

Certainly this is a God-pleasing venture. Just think of how Jesus spent his last days and last moments with the disciples before he ascended into heaven. As we heard from the gospel of Luke earlier, before Jesus ascended into heaven Jesus led his disciples into

the Scriptures and opened their minds so that they could understand how God's Word spoke about him.

Our hearts and our minds aren't always that open and filled with understanding of God and his word. Because of sin we fall back into nearsighted spiritual complacency. Instead of having a hunger and thirst for the word of God, instead of having a desire to learn more about our LORD and grow in our faith through the enlightenment of Bible study and hearing and learning God's Word in worship and meditation, we become complacent in our faith. We may even dream up of other ways that we may stay connected to Christ. (I will visit with Christ when I am out on the boat fishing in his beautiful creation. I will visit with Christ when I am in the tractor.) These are ways that might seem easier, but prove to be unreliable, because we are not lead directly to Word and Sacraments. In love therefore, God sends the prayer of pastor Paul to us through his Word. ***18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*** With this earnest and genuine prayer, the Lord reminds us of the importance of being connected to Christ through Word and Sacrament so that the Holy Spirit might work on our hearts and minds so that we might know Christ better and hold tightly to his blessings and continue to grow in the faith that we have been given.

Through his Word we realize that as the body of Christ we are connected to each other through faith, however, there is a union that outweighs even the communion that we have with each other. As members of the body of Christ we are connected to him who is our head. This is a truth of utmost importance, for even as we serve the church, as we are connected to each other, we may be tempted to think that is far as the connection goes. We know some nice people, they help us out from time to time, we get to see them on Sunday, we even get to see a few more of them on other special occasions. We work together and do some nice things for our members and the members of the community. Dear Christian, don't forget, never doubt that you are connected to Christ. You are part of the body and Christ is the head. As a member of Christ's church you are connected to him. You are connected to Christ. As surely as the head knows when the throat hurts or when the taste buds are pleased or when the toe is stubbed Christ knows the members of his body. He knows what you are going through. He knows when we hurt. He knows when you rejoice. He knows you are happy and satisfied, he knows when you are not.

As Christ ascends into heaven a part of us rushes to the logical conclusion that he has departed. He is no longer here. He walked with the disciples back then, but there lacks a true connection now. As those thoughts come over you, as those doubts creep in, go to his Word and see how our Savior speaks to you. Listen as he speaks to disciples of all ages with these words of promise and comfort, ***And surely I will be with you always to the very end of the age.*** As you go to the Word of Truth the Spirit of God will be at work and he will remind of the promises and the power of your Ascended Savior. Your Savior has ascended, but he has not departed from you. No matter if the

problems of the day make you feel that way, it is not true. Your Savior in his glorified state is everywhere. He is with you now. He is with you wherever you go. You are connected to him. The one who lived and died for you is one who rules over all things. The one whose hands and feet were pierced and nailed to the cross for your sins is now the one who has everything under his feet. And yet he is intimately connected with his Church. The living one who has defeated sin and death and hell for you, now in his power, in his wisdom, and in his love, he chooses to spend his days watching over you, close to you, with you, until he comes again in glory to be with you face-to-face forever.

This is the kind of love that he has for you. He love you so much that it fills his whole being. Notice the last few words of our lesson for today. ²² ***And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,*** ²³ ***which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*** Jesus is ruler over all. Our Ascended Lord has taken up his position of glory and power. Jesus Christ is God. He is the one who created all the universe, who formed the heavenly bodies and positioned them in their designated space. Jesus our LORD is the one who fills everything in every way and yet who does he say is his body: us. Out of all his breathtaking creation he chooses sinners like you and me to have this unique and special designation: Christ is the head; we are the body. Nothing else in all creation can make that claim. Christ fills everything in every way but he reserves that special designation for his believers. Christ is the head; we are the body. We are connected to him through faith.

He may have ascended into heaven but he is still very much connected to you and He promises his believers that will be the case forever. As surely your head knows the second any part of your body aches, Jesus intimately and immediately knows your aches and pains, your problems and frustrations; and he cares. He knows what you are going through. He is with you in joy and sadness, in times of gladness and grief. He is there for you in this age and he will be with you in the next. Just as surely as we will be with our Savior in heaven he is with us now. And in his love he gives you God the Holy Spirit to assure you and me of this wonderful truth. The Holy Spirit works through Word and Sacrament to connect you to Christ and keep you connected to your God and Savior so that you each day you may know ***the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,*** ¹⁹ ***and his incomparably great power for us who believe.***

In his great love our crucified and risen and ascended Lord gives us this great assurance: You are connected. You are connected to each other and through that connection God can do great things through you. You are connected to Christ, the one who rules all things, is the head of the church and we are the body. He is connected to each of us now. In an intimate and personal way, he is connected to you, and he cares for you. And one day we will be with him forever in heaven. May God continually open the eyes of your heart so that you may see and know and believe these wonderful truths. Amen.