

Carving Out A Space
The Epistle. Ephesians iii. 13.

I DESIRE that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory. For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

There are many, many treasures that God would fill our lives with that must wait until there is a space within us that is sufficiently large to receive them. The Lord offered an apt metaphor for this idea in his parable of the wineskins: *...no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish* (Luke 5:37). Every new thing that is introduced into our lives must be at a measured pace in accordance with our ability to handle it.

Today's prayer of St. Paul's in the Epistle is just of this same order. Those things that he is praying for us, in order to come to pass, will require making room in our hearts. There are things that can't come in, until other things are moved out, or until new space is created. *Breadth, and length, and depth, and height* imply great dimension. Make room, make room! But how indeed is great room made within us?

There are two ways, as just noted: by getting rid of stuff so that the space that's already available is freed, or by increasing capacity, and actually creating new space. Neither of these processes, by any means, are pain-free.

Throwing things out for me is never easy. I start attributing value to useless items, fearful that the moment I discard them will be the moment that some use is found for them. It is the pack-rat mentality. Sometimes we wish we could just toss a small explosive device into certain rooms, close our eyes, and then turn and run, so as to be mercifully prevented from witnessing the destruction.

But we must be merciless with spiritual clutter. What does some of it look like? I can see within myself some big boxes that are full of records with the label of "good works" that I prominently glued on them. I go to them far too often to review their contents. Instead of giving them to God as a gift, and forgetting about them in order to move on, I dwell on them, relishing in them, inflating their value in my own eyes, and using them to surround myself with all sorts of layers of warm self-assurance. When I sin, or do something stupid, embarrassing, or inappropri-

ate, I run back to the boxes to try to reestablish a sense of value. But they are baggage. Even if they are real, and have value, none of it belongs to me. It's all God's. *All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee* (BCP p. 73, I Chron. xxix. 14.).

I see boxes and closets full of old clothing. Some of it appeals to my tendency to fantasize "Oh, how I miss my youth! There was so much that I could do then, that I can no longer do now. I was successful. There is that suit I wore when I made a six-figure salary, and was well-known and respected. There is the gold lapel-pin I received at a party at work held specially in my honor for my twenty-five years of professional service. If I could only try these things on again, and become once again in the eyes of others what I once was..." How desperate I am for an attractive self-image, now that I am deprived of those things by which I once identified myself! But it has all become just glorified rags, just "grave clothes". It has nothing to do with the present, and it undermines the value of what my past years have been forming me into for this very moment, and whatever future moments God grants me.

I see a pile of rusty, antique, unused tools and machinery. It speaks of a day when I was powerful, strong, and self-reliant. Where other men faltered, I moved ahead. Where they gave up, I persevered. "Failure" was never part of my vocabulary. But age has given me the hindsight to realize that I was more often self-reliant than God-dependent. My weakness now is far more apparent than my capability. This pile is junk, and I've got to get rid of it, along with the boxes and the clothes. Hard work. Some weeping and crying. But it's got to happen.

As I begin moving the debris out, I suddenly realize that I'm going to have to act fast. Each item is becoming heavier by the moment, and more and more cumbersome. Why is it so? It is the increasing weight of bitterness, regrets, and self-pity that threatens to make my task nearly impossible for me. I cannot afford to delay. I should trash it at once, before I am tempted to hold a yard sale, which might fail if the weather isn't good, leaving me once again with having to deal with it. And dragging it back inside, I would only be tempted anew.

Now, then, having made available more space, how can I create new room, increasing the dimensions of my life to accommodate that which God so desires to put within me? Suffering and hardship are the excavators of life that dig out great spaces within our hearts. They have been at work all of our lives—steady, steady work—, carving trenches, leveling hills to prepare for the foundation of virtues that otherwise would have no ground within us. Some of this work has had the force of a dynamite charge. But this is a formative process whose consequence will be something of eternal worth and endurance. This is why the project is so titanic in scope.

I can stand in the way of the heavy equipment, if I so choose. I can deny it entrance to the property of my life, doing my best to keep far away from costly human interactions, surrounding myself with “insurance policies” that go as far as possible in guaranteeing me that a whole host of variables will never come even near me. But inside I recognize the futility of such a course of action. Some day, somehow, things will catch up to me. Better to face them now, then later. And a time will come, as the Preacher of Ecclesiastes reminds us, when *All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again* (3:20). And so my role here is a more passive one: allowing my hardships to do their God-given work within me.

But lets return to our text, because the reward of our labor, and of our submission in faith to the circumstances of life, is a very great one, indeed:

I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.

Strengthened with might by His Spirit... Here is strength that will cause you to stand upright and courageously in each and every circumstance. The Greek word for *might* is literally “dynamite”. It is strength with power. This will be coupled with *Christ dwelling in your hearts by faith*. In place of all that you have so diligently chosen to reject from the chambers of your heart, you have welcomed Christ Himself to take His rightful place. To all of these extraordinary superlatives the apostle adds yet another, whose dimensions surely exceed anything that can exist in a merely physical, earthly realm. It is *love* without limit, built upon that level place you permitted to be created slowly and painstakingly in your life. This is the *love* that will overflow from the deep, wide cup that is you, to family, to friends, to your community, to everyone God brings close to you.

In place of the rubbish that filled the attic of my life, and with a vast new amount of room made available by the process of accepting those divine afflictions I’ve been given, I am finally *filled with all the fulness of God*. This could never have happened, had the circumstances been different. I might have possessed much, but it would never have equalled that which the Lord desires to give.

I don’t know what this phrase implies. It surely is beyond description. But I know it must be wonderful.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.