

A Pastor's Prayer

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Responding to God's Extravagant Grace

Celebration Sunday

Ephesians 3:14-21

I would like to begin today by reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3, beginning in verse 14.

"For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen."

Here is the way the apostle Paul begins, "For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being."

The apostle Paul begins with this little phrase, "For this reason, I kneel before Father." For what reason, Paul? Paul has just gotten through announcing God's purposes for the church in Ephesus, in fact for every church everywhere, God's purposes in making a people who would be able to demonstrate his power, his love, his wisdom, not only to other people in the world, but God has a purpose in the church to demonstrate his character to angels and demons. Paul has just gotten through announcing the cosmic purposes of God. In eternity past, there was an enormous war, a cosmic war, in the heavenlies. As a result of that first angelic rebellion, where Satan and a third of the angels rebelled against God and were cast from the heavenlies, God decided to vindicate his justice and vindicate his goodness, his love, his divine character by creating this extraordinary, unified people call the church.

So Paul gets done addressing these enormous purposes of God, these cosmic purposes, and as he considers what God intends the church to be, it forces Paul to his knees. You cannot consider and meditate upon God's great purposes for the church without being pushed down to your knees by the weight, the greatness, and the immensity of what God's intentions are. A man or woman cannot remain standing when you begin to contemplate what God intends for the church. The wind of the thing just pushes you down and drives you to prayer.

He says, "For this reason, I kneel before the Father..." Having meditated on what God wants to do with you, I am forced to my knees and I pray these things.

I will tell you, brothers and sisters, when I consider what God the Father intends for the Columbus Vineyard, when I look and just open myself up just even a little to the enormous grace and favor that has been on us as a people these last 20 years, when I read the testimonies of all that God has done in your individual lives, when I see these sweet touches of kindness and favor from the Lord—we just got through with a two month giving campaign and had virtually no negative comments from 4000 people. Just consider this with me. In the typical church with the typical group of people, giving campaigns bring to the surface all this underlying, unhealed stuff. They bring out the real character of people, the cynicism, the judgments, and the unhealed hurts from years past. And here we are, this huge church, with a very diverse group of people, literally a thousand people who have been here less than two years, and in all of the meetings, all these contact meetings and showing the video to a couple of thousand people and interacting through leaders and all of that, there was virtually no criticism. No angry comments. No one storming out of the church. No one grabbing their kids and saying, “That’s enough.” No divisions.

But absolutely quite the contrary, not only was there an absence of negativity, do you know that the Columbus Vineyard has actually been growing in the midst of a giving campaign? It’s unheard of. Over the last couple of months we have seen a regular stream of converts. We had our best attended weekends ever last weekend. We have heard testimonies of some of the greatest healings we have ever seen in the healing of a terminally ill child. One person stopped me in the hall and said, “I have just been coming to the church for a month and a half. I just want to encourage you because I know that most people who come to a church in a giving campaign are turned off. They just want to go. This place is so wonderful. I sense God’s presence so much here that I am going to join this church.”

One couple, who has just been coming for a few weeks had a romantic weekend planned for this weekend for their second anniversary. They told one of our leaders, “We can postpone our weekend and go next week, or the week after, but we are canceling our plans because we don’t want to miss what is going to go on in the convention center.”

When I consider the favor on this place, the unusual degree of health that God has given the Columbus Vineyard; when I consider the unusual amount of talent that he has amassed here; when I consider the unusual level of generosity, so that this church is really right in the middle of the top tier of all contemporary churches, mainly appealing to baby boomers and busters—I read article after article about how boomers and busters don’t give and what their purpose in giving is and then I see this extraordinary generosity. 240 leaders in this church have already pledged 3 1/2 million dollars toward the 9 million dollar cost of the new facility. Then I consider the hundreds of young adults filling Joshua House and I see that they have the same passion, the same radical desire to really go for it that we had when many of us started this church two decades ago; when I see God taking the torch and passing it along to the next generation—

And I consider the plans that God has for this church in the future, plans to have us plant dozens of churches overseas and domestically, plans for us to

reach hundreds and hundreds of international students; plans for us to reach more and more of the disabled community; plans for us to expand ministry in the inner city and among those who have AIDS and who are sick; plans for us to see thousands of new converts in the next five years, and disciple thousands of new believers, and change hundreds of families, rescue hundreds from the brink of divorce and release hundreds from addictions—

Brothers and sisters, when I consider the favor of God that has been on us as a church family, and I consider the purposes of God in his intentions for the church in the future, as your pastor I am forced to my knees, like the apostle Paul, to pray first of all for our strengthening.

Verse 16: “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being...”

These things that God has been doing in our midst, and his purposes and intentions for us creates such a sense of inadequacy, such a sense of profound insufficiency, that I cry out with the apostle Paul, “Lord, who is competent for these things? Who is adequate? What group of people can carry this type of anointing and favor without messing up? Without just wasting it and throwing it all away? I know this is not an ordinary thing that you are doing, Almighty God. Make us strong enough. Give us enough internal integrity and strength of character, strength of godliness, strength of commitment and perseverance to bear up under the anointing.”

Brothers and sisters, the great test that we have been facing and that we will face even more in the future is the test of success. What kind of people have we been and what kind of people will we be when God makes us even more successful and increases our influence even more in this city, nationally and internationally? We are going to pass through the fire of success. We are going to be sifted and our real character is going to be revealed. What kind of people will we be when this building is up and we start filling a huge place?

When we consider how big the thing is that God has for the Columbus Vineyard, what can we do other than drop to our knees in prayer for strengthening?

“Lord, our frame is too weak, our character too unstable, our hearts too deceptive. Grant us the capacity for your plans.”

And, then, as John Stott puts it, Paul is on an ascending staircase having prayed for strengthening, he prays that the church would be rooted and grounded in love. Verse 17, “And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love...”

Paul is using two different metaphors when he speaks of rooting and grounding. When he says, “I pray that you would be rooted and grounded in love” rooting immediately calls to mind a tree, a mighty oak tree, a great cedar tree that is greatly rooted where the roots go way down in the ground.

And grounded is the picture of a building, it’s a building metaphor. It is talking about a foundation that goes way down. Here is the idea, when God wants to do something huge, when we want to make a great oak tree, the roots of it will have to go down very deeply. When we build a skyscraper, you don’t dig a 6-inch foundation for a skyscraper. Have you ever seen how deep the hole goes for a skyscraper? I grew up in New York and they will dig down nearly as far as

the building is going to be tall. They'll sink those pillars into rock in order to support this enormous structure.

The idea is that in order for the purposes of God to be realized in the Vineyard, we have to dig deep. We have to aim at depth. We can't have a quick, easy, slipshod approach thinking that we can make disciples in three easy steps or we will just take this class and you will be a disciple. Here, read this book. Listen to this tape. God wants so much more than just an audience, a big crowd to hear me speak. God wants deeply rooted disciples. He wants people whose lives and families are marked by stability, by consistency, who can stand up against the winds and storms and trials of life. He wants a church that is going to last, not just be around today and have a little splash, but that will be here a decade from now serving the Lord faithfully in Columbus and two decades from now and then our children will take over and then their children.

Rooting and grounding speak to me about digging deep. And what is the soil that a church is to be rooted and grounded in? The soil is the soil of love. God, strengthen the church so that we can fulfill your purposes, Lord, because we are inadequate. And then, God, root and ground the church in the soil of love. That is the second prayer.

Why pray for love? Why pray, "God make the mark of Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Columbus love?" Why pray, "God make love the dominant characteristic, the one thing above everything else that would hold it all together?" Why pray for us to be rooted in love?

There are lots of reasons that we can come up with. I think of two primary reasons. #1, there is nothing people need more than love. Folks coming in here, the one thing that every single person who comes to the Vineyard has in common is that they need to be loved. The one common characteristic of every single person we touch here in Central Ohio that we touch through our church plants that we touch overseas – the one common characteristic is that every single person needs to be loved. It doesn't matter if you are successful or unsuccessful, every person needs to be loved. Everyone, no matter who they are needs to be encouraged, everyone needs to hear good job, you are important! You are appreciated! That's the reason why so many folks are having sex outside of marriage. That's the reason why we are so sexually broken and why so many of you have stumbled and really struggled with your sexuality. This is the reason why some of you have stayed in abusive relationships and why some of you have compromised and settled for much less than God's best in terms of dating and engagements. That's why so many people take off with God by receiving just a little bit of love. When you look at people with all of our insecurities and all of our neediness, you can bank on it. The one thing every person you ever meet needs is to be loved. Many of the testimonies in your booklets talk about the effect of your love on someone.

I want to read to you one of the testimonies that you will find in your booklet regarding how this church rallied in love to rescue a young woman who was on the verge of having an abortion.

"It was December of 1994. My husband, one of the pastors here at the Vineyard, called me from work one afternoon and surprised me by announcing

that he had taken the next morning off of work to stay home with our then 4 year old and 1 1/2 year old to give me some time off from mothering. "Go do something you'd like to do." he said. The next morning I took a stack of photographs to label and headed to the McDonalds in Clintonville for pancakes and coffee. When I looked around for a place to sit, I found a window seat facing High Street. As I was pondering what to write on the backs of my photos, I looked out the window and realized that I had a view of the front doors of a local abortion clinic. When I saw a woman go in or come out, I would pray silently to God for that woman.

Then I began to daydream. I pictured one of these women coming out of the clinic, walking into the McDonald's to order, meeting up with them and helping them so that they wouldn't have to go through with an abortion. You see, I know firsthand the pain an abortion can cause in a young woman's life.

To my surprise, within seconds of this daydream, I saw a woman walk out of the clinic, cross the street, come in, order, and sit down at a table not far from me. Now I couldn't help but wonder if God had seen my heart's desire. Then I realized that this might be one of those opportunities that Christians call a "divine appointment." Of course I did what any mature Christian would do, I went to the women's restroom and paced.

By God's grace, I approached her, told her I had noticed her coming out of the clinic, that I cared about women in crisis pregnancies, and I wanted to help in any way I could. She was scheduled for an abortion the next morning. As we talked, she began to cry and share her situation with me. It became apparent in our conversation that she didn't really want an abortion, but felt stuck. Her boyfriend was not supportive of a pregnancy, she had no health insurance, no car, and her family lived two states away. When I told her that I could help her and that God would bless her life if she chose to give her baby life, she believed me. The next morning instead of going to her abortion appointment, I picked her up and drove her to her first pre-natal appointment at New Life Nurse-Midwifery Care. The following week she came to my women's group, Women for Life, where she received money to buy maternity clothes and a tape of my personal testimony, which I had shared at the Fall Women's Breakfast. A couple of weeks later, she went to put on some music and put my tape on by mistake. She listened to the entire tape and by the end, surrendered her life to Jesus Christ.

In addition to her conversion and the life of her child who is now 3, a most awesome aspect of this "God Story" is how God used various members of this church to lavish His extravagant grace on her by providing a home, helping her move, getting her a job, providing medical care, giving her numerous cars, providing maternity and baby clothes, providing a family for her and her son, providing free babysitting, providing legal advice, etc. etc.

The young woman in this story is LaMonica Holden. Her son, who turned 3 on July 17th, is Tori Capri Holden. Some of you may have met them. Many people in this church have now been the recipients of LaMonica's talents and gifts. LaMonica now stands in front of a local clinic once a month to tell women who feel stuck in their situation, that there's help and support for them if they would change their minds and not go through with an abortion. Since the time

that I met LaMonica at McDonald's she has become a precious friend and sister in Christ whom I love and laugh a lot with.

God has continued to write "God Stories" through the Vineyard Pro-Life Ministry in this church. But today I shared the first chapter. Without the church this first chapter would have been much, much shorter and never completed."

But not only is love something that everyone of us needs, it is being rooted and grounded in love that will keep us energized, that will keep the church motivated, that will keep the church fueled and about kingdom work for generations. There is nothing more energizing than love.

You say, "What is going to keep this church going hard after Christ in the 21st Century?"

Here are the great purposes of God. God has all kinds of favor on the Columbus Vineyard. He has this enormous call on us as a church to reach this city for Christ, to exert major cultural influence, to see thousands of people come to know Jesus. He has packed so much into us, what is going to keep us fueled and motivated? What's going to make us keep taking risks when we build this big new space? What keeps a church from becoming apathetic? There is one thing and one thing only—love.

Paul says in 2 Cor. 5, having gotten through describing all of the hardships that he has been through, the whippings, being stoned, being imprisoned, being rejected, being persecuted, being hungry and thirsty, he describes what his motivation is, the fuel that he drinks to keep him going every day. He says, "For the love of Christ constrains me."

Here is my starter button in the morning. I love Jesus. I love every thing about Him. I love what He does in my life. I love His presence. I love what He does when He gets a hold of other people.

Why does Paul pray that the church would be rooted and grounded in love? It is because there is nothing more motivating, more energizing; nothing that will keep us more fueled than love. Let me put it this way, people will do for love what they wouldn't do for any other reason. Because of love you will stay up all night with a sick child. Because of love the widow in the Bible gave away her last two coins to God. It's love that causes people to sacrifice, to cut things back, to deny themselves. It's just love.

I remember a few years ago when we were in England, my wife, Marlene, got really sick. She is a small person, but she looked particularly fragile, really frail. She got real pale. She got even thinner. We were in this London apartment one evening and it was about 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. I could see Marlene just shivering in bed with this really high fever. And I just wrapped my arms around her and, in love, held her for several hours so that she would be warmed. I didn't care if I got sick. I didn't care about the fact that I wasn't sleeping, that she was disturbing my sleep. All of you who are in love would do the same thing for your lover.

Imagine a church rooted like that? That we say because we love, we will do anything. We will open up our lives and our groups to new people. We will give and sacrifice to achieve God's purposes; we will jeopardize our own comfort and we will refuse to seek security in this world. Out of love, people will go from here

to work among some Muslim group. Because of love, folks will work in the inner-city, work with people who have AIDS, work with kids or youth week after week, counsel folks who are unhappy. Because of love many of you will make a pledge.

And then Paul, the pastor, prays a third thing. Not only that we would be rooted and grounded in love, our love for others, but that we might have the power together with all the saints to grasp how wide and how long and how high and how deep is the love of Christ. Pastors have preached series on the four dimensions of Christ's love – its width, its length, its depth, and its height. There have been books written focusing on just verse 18. The prayers of Paul just seem to be getting bigger and bigger.

When I think of the dimensions of the love of Christ, as laid out by Paul, they are just communicating vastness. When people try to find metaphors for the love of God, they usually talk about the ocean, something really really big.

Let me just go through this briefly. Paul says – I want you guys to have some apprehension, some comprehension of what is incomprehensible, what is infinite – Christ's love, a love that surpasses all knowledge. It is not that we can't think about it. Some people think that when you are talking about Christ's love, you just have to go with your heart. It is not something that you would even try to meditate on with your mind, with your intellect. Christ's love bypasses the mind. He doesn't say that Christ's love bypasses the mind, he says that it surpasses the mind. It is so vast, that even while we try to gain some apprehension of it, it is too big.

Let's quickly survey the dimensions. He prays that we might have power together with all the saints to grasp how wide the love of Christ is. Every one of us thinks that Christ's love is narrower than it is. We are always coming upon people that we exclude from the scope of the love of Christ. The Jews in Jesus' day excluded the Gentiles. Later, the Gentile church excluded the Jews. Divorced people exclude their ex-spouses. Abused people exclude their abusers. Racists exclude people of other races. During wartime, we exclude the enemy. Almost all of us believe in some way or another that Christ's love is narrower than it is. And it is a stunning thing, it catches you completely off guard, when you see for the first time that Christ's love extends to that person who has hurt you or has maligned and abused you. That person whose behavior you hate. That Christ's love is enough for them, the one who hurt your child or your spouse in the past. That drunken father. That insane mother. That abusive husband. That foul-mouthed boss.

It is a profound thing that occurs when you see how wide Christ's love is and that it is wide enough even for you.

Many of the testimonies that we have received have been stories of people who have discovered the breadth of God's love through this church. Let me share with you one of the stories.

You invited us to share our stories of what God has done in our lives through Vineyard Christian Fellowship. I would like to thank you for asking – because it's been so great hearing the powerful things He is doing amongst His people. I'd

like to take a few moments to tell you about the work that God's done in my life through many people at Vineyard.

It was early in the summer of 1995, and my life seemed to be going pretty well, by my own estimations. I had a good job, a nice apartment, and was generally in good health. I was feeling a bit edgy about my upcoming trip home to attend my brother's wedding in Michigan. I knew that it would be the usual barrage of questions: "Are you seeing anyone"? "When are you getting married"?... I had grown used to the interrogation, but that made me no more comfortable in that situation. You see I had told my parents about a year before that I was gay. But being the wonderfully concerned parents that they are, they didn't want anyone else in my family to know my "secret".

I had *not* been overly involved in the gay scene for the previous three or four years. I had been trying to take some time to figure out what had gone wrong in a four-year homosexual relationship. Since the time when that relationship had ended, I had come to terms with the sexual abuse that I had encountered years before in a high school seminary. I felt that I had dealt with those issues in my counseling sessions, and had picked up the pieces and was ready to move on with my life.

I was ready to go and be the big brother at this wedding and would return to my wonderful life and my search for "Mr. Right". Within a week of my return from my brother's wedding, I was faced with the only thing that I could bring my plans for my own life to an end. It was the one thing that I would not let myself believe could ever happen to me. I was diagnosed with HIV I lost all perspective and hope and was certain of only one thing – my immanent death.

It was against this backdrop that a former college roommate and his wife asked me to be a part of their search for a church here in Columbus. They proceeded to describe some of what they did and did not want in a church. I was only able to think of one place that even sounded remotely like what they were seeking – I remembered that back in 1992 a friend had invited me to attend church with him at Vineyard for the last three weeks before he left for California – that church had stuck in my mind as "the warehouse with purple awnings". My friends insisted that I go with them to show them where this place was. I eventually agreed simply so that they would stop bugging me about it.

We went to one of the Sunday morning services and in the announcements there was this ministry mentioned that helped AIDS patients (Project Compassion). Although I didn't show it at the time I was shocked that a church would have a ministry like this, but even more that they were not afraid to announce it publicly. My previous experience of church was a blatant rejection of me not just for the gay life that I was living, but also for the fact that I would think of accusing their own leaders of such impossible acts as sexual abuse. I was so blown away with the idea that a church was willing to look at the truth regardless of its implications on their reputation that I went home and cried uncontrollably for hours. At the Vineyard that day, I recognized the loving heart of God that I had known as a child.

My friends and I returned the next week. We liked what we were seeing and decided to give this church an honest try. It was only a few weeks before I

gave Christ control of my life and my former college roommate accepted Jesus too.

I began to understand God's gift to me. And found freedom within my current circumstances through an understanding of Paul's insight – "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us". (Romans 8:18) For the first time since the sexual abuse, I began to see hope restored in my life. I had abandoned God because of abuse from leaders in other churches. But over the past three years that I have been attending Vineyard, God has restored my ability to trust in the integrity of His leaders. Because of what God has done through the entire body of Christ, and specifically at the Vineyard, I have left the homosexual lifestyle. God has provided me with complete suppression of the HIV in my body, through the use of new anti-retroviral drugs. And I have been honored with opportunities to speak on several occasions for Project Compassion and at various churches in central Ohio about what Jesus has done in my life. I am now co-leading Gideon's Call, a new ministry at Vineyard, to help men and women who are leaving the homosexual lifestyle.

And the story doesn't end with me...because of what several of my friends have seen God do in my life over the past three years and without any evangelistic effort on my part, three of my closest friends have come out of the gay life style and accepted Jesus. I know that this was purely God's own hand working through me to touch the lives of those around me.

I have no words to describe the overwhelming honor that I feel being a witness to what God is doing in this church. I thank and praise Him every day for the work He has done in my life. But, Rich, I also want to thank you and the scores of people at Vineyard who have let God use them to restore His hope and life in me. A prodigal son of a loving Father."

Not only is Christ's love wide, but it is long. Do you know how long the love of Christ is? It stretches from eternity past and goes forward to infinite eternity in the future. Christ's love for you has always been there, it had no beginning point. Christ's love for you did not start when you chose recently to repent. It didn't start with your latest act of faithfulness. It doesn't even go back to your conversion when you first surrendered your life to Jesus as Lord. Christ's love for you didn't even start at your birth or at your conception. Do you know when your name was written in the Book of Life, the book that guarantees your eternal salvation? The Book of Revelation says that your name was written in the Book of Life before the creation of the world. Christ's love had no beginning point for you. While you were still an enemy of God, Christ died for you.

His love is so long that it has no pauses. There is no variation in it. It is not intermittent. It doesn't start and stop. It is a cord that reaches back to eternity past and is consistent through all of our inconsistencies.

The hymn writer writes, "O love that will not let me go". In the present time this cord of love stays faithful to us. I think of the story of the prodigal father, the father with the rebellious child who has been given everything and who, yet, runs from the father. Some of the testimonies we received were of prodigal sons and daughters, who knew Christ and who ran from him and, in the course of running,

lost everything but the love of God. Christ's love would not let them go. He hounded them. He went after them. And this love of Christ is so long that it will last unstill eternity future. As the apostle Paul writes, "Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God."

Christ's love is high. We can't imagine how high the thoughts are that God has of us. We look at ourselves and we see inconsistent creatures. We see stains. We see selfishness. We see unforgiveness. We see prayerlessness. We see negligence.

It blows our minds to consider how high the thoughts are of God toward us. The apostle John has this extravagant burst, this exclamation, when he tries to describe how high the thoughts are of Jesus Christ toward us. In 1 John 3 he says, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are."

How high are God's thoughts about you? He doesn't see you as overweight, ugly, failed in business, struggling, failed in marriage, arrogant, irritable, and anxious. He calls you beloved child, fully accepted, liberated in Jesus Christ. He calls every one of you saint, priest of God, holy one, the righteousness of Christ. He changes our name. His thoughts about us are unimaginably high.

And we are changed in the reflection of those thoughts. As we meditate on how high the thoughts of God are toward us, we are changed and healed. Our peace and confidence and our joy is restored. Our restlessness is suppressed. Our insecurities are suppressed.

And finally, on this final step, Paul speaks of the depth of the love of Christ. I love Corrie ten Boom's line, "There is no hole so deep that God's love is not deeper still." Many of the testimonies we received have been stories of the depth of God's love, that no matter how deep a hole someone had fallen in, God's love is deeper still.

"I grew up in an intact family and attended a mainline denominational church and can't remember a time when I didn't believe in God and Jesus. Life was uncomplicated until I became sexually active at 17. By 19, I had my first abortion and ran away with my boyfriend. I eventually returned home, finished college and began to embark on a series of empty relationships. At 27, I became pregnant by a man I truly loved. As soon as he heard the news, he left town and I had my second abortion. I had friends who were Christians, but I knew I could never measure up and often made fun of them behind their backs.

When I became pregnant again at 34, I knew that mentally I could not go through another abortion. I vowed to God that I would change my lifestyle and raise my baby in a Christian home. When my son was a few weeks old, I returned to the church I had attended to meet with the minister about having my baby baptized. The pastor was very cold and told me that although he was glad I hadn't aborted the child, I should have given it up for adoption. He never wanted me to talk with anyone about my lifestyle. He finished by agreeing to baptize the child with the stipulation that the baptismal ceremony would include a confession of my sin. I didn't step foot into another church for almost five years.

In the spring of 1991, some friends invited me to the Vineyard. I didn't know what to think. Here was a Jew with a New York accent preaching, along

with a style of worship music that was totally foreign to me. It was so different from what I knew, yet I could almost hear God saying, "The pastor at Vineyard is a man of truth." I started attending Vineyard full-time late that summer.

When I had been at Vineyard for about two years, God challenged me to deal with my past. The shame and misery of my two abortions was something I had buried so deeply inside that I had no intention of letting it out. After weeks and weeks of being barraged by newspaper articles, television shows, radio programs, and references of all kinds to abortion, I finally said to God, "No, don't make me do this. I'll do anything you ask, just don't make me think or talk about my past." I knew there was an abortion recovery class at the Vineyard but I steered clear of it.

It was at this point I learned that when God wants you to do something, there is no escaping it. As the "nudging" continued, I began to think about how good God was and how my life had changed since coming to the Vineyard. I could hear Him saying to me "Look what I've done for you. Look how far you've come in your Christian life. I have more in store for you, but first you need to trust me and deal with your abortions." I attended the next abortion recovery class. God met me every step of the way and enveloped me in His love and forgiveness. Going to the class was the most difficult thing I have ever done in my life, but it was crucial to my understanding and acceptance of God's gift on the cross, our Savior Jesus Christ.

My son is growing up. He knows the Lord and has been baptized by his own choice. I am keeping my promise to raise him in a Christian home and God is blessing my efforts. I know He is at work in my son's life. God truly is a "father to the fatherless."

And now we come up to the summit of the mountain, the fourth of this ascending staircase, verse 19, "That you might be filled to the measure of the fullness of God."

Here is a pastor's prayer, that you might be filled, church, with the fullness of God. How many of us are often satisfied with just a little taste of God, a blessing from God, and a touch of the Lord? Our lives are filled with entertainment and filled with TV and filled with shopping and activities. And filled with even good things – blessings from God – family, friendships, church and giftings.

But Paul says – I want the very best thing for you, actually the very best one for you. Church, I want you to climb to the very summit so that your life is filled with supreme goodness, with supreme bliss and happiness. I want you to have a life filled with God.

We can have so many things in our life, so many good things. We can be part of this wonderful church called the Columbus Vineyard, but we won't have all that God intends unless we are filled with God. Unless when people come here, they feel the presence of God – not just the presence of each other. Not just our love. Not just our giving and sacrifice. But when they feel God, Jesus says, you can gain the whole world. You can have it all. But if in the process you lose your own soul, if you lose God, then you have lost it all.

Listen, here is the deal. God desires us to continue to be thirsty for him. God wants you to be hungry for him. He wants to create in you a continual desire for

more and more of God. To refuse to be satisfied by any of the lower steps until you reach the summit. To say, "Lord, I don't want anything less than you."

You know, brothers and sisters, I have been in a wonderfully privileged situation. I realize that and it humbles me. I have been in a wonderfully privileged position to be able to pastor this church, to be a part of the church first, and then to pastor here. To be connected in a deep way with many of you, in friendship, in real family and brotherhood. To be privileged to see what God is doing here. To be used by the Lord. All of the things I have gotten a chance to take part in and enjoy. Many of you have had the opportunity to take part in and enjoy.

But there is an ache in my heart for myself and for you that we wouldn't trade in anything for more of God. This is the driving motivation, when I am living in the shadows, even when everything else is going well around me, but I am living in the shadows, I am not seeking God, I am not living fully in the light. There is unconfessed sin in my life. The driving motivation to get things right is because I enjoy the Lord. Because there is no one else that satisfies like Jesus.

And then Paul closes. Having brought us to the very pinnacle of the mountain, filled with the fullness of God, he closes with a wonderful doxology, this great expression of worship that is loaded with superlatives.

"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all that we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever!"

Do you know what he is saying? He is saying, "Do you think that my prayers for you church, - and I would say the same thing today, do you think my prayers for you, Columbus Vineyard, are too big to pray? That you would be satisfied by nothing else other than God? To pray that you would know the vastness of Christ's love for you? To pray that you would be a loving church and that the mark of the church would be love? To pray that you would have the capacity to hold the anointing?"

Do you think that those prayers are too big, Paul is saying. Do you think that I am just getting carried away? Let's remember, first, who we are praying to when we bow before the Father. He says, "To him who is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine." Let's remember who we are praying to. He can do immeasurably more than all we ask. We can never pray a prayer too big for God. There is nothing you could ever ask that is too big for God. You can't even think of something that is too big for infinite God. There is no limits on what the Lord can do for a people who are filled with him. Everything is possible with God.

And then he says, "Do you want to get a handle on it?"

"To him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work in us." Do you want to get a handle on how infinitely great God is? Consider his power that has been at work in your life. Consider your own testimony – how the Lord rescued you from the hole you fell in and how He continues to do it. How faithful and how patient He is with you despite your resistance, despite your faintheartedness. Despite your inconsistencies. Consider that you haven't been lost, that God has kept you in His hand. That He regularly creates in you more love for Jesus. Consider the

church – to Him be glory in the church. Consider the awesomeness of what He did.

We looked at that video. Here we are worshiping in the basement of a bank. And again in this little Republican Glee Club. When I joined the church there were 35 of us worshiping in this little house on Weber Road where Republican men would gather on the pretense of forming a little glee club to sing at Republican dinners, but really it was just an excuse to get away from their wives and pour down a couple of beers with friends. That's where our church met on Sunday mornings under a big eagle with Richard Nixon on one side and a photo of some other Republican from the past on the other. The kids playing behind the bar in the basement. To get some idea of what God is able to do, he took a couple dozen 20-year olds and he produced a church that now embraces all of you and a church that is going to embrace many more than you.

To Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations. Superlative upon superlative. Mega-adjective upon mega-adjective. It's these enormous things and all that God has done that brings the apostle to his knees and that over the years has dropped me to my knees over and over again for you. God has huge things in store for us and wants us to pray huge prayers for their fulfillment.

And all of God's people said, "Amen."