



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Ninth Sunday After Pentecost**

**July 26, 2015**

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### **“IIWII?”**

*(Ephesians 3:20)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“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” (Eph. 3:20).*

**COLLECT:** Almighty and most merciful God, the protector of all who trust in Your love You will rescue us from all adversities; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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A number of years ago, someone asked me if it was wrong to pray that God rewind time a little bit and change the way something happened so that it works out better the second go around. Maybe you said or did something completely inappropriate and out of character and it deeply hurt other individuals. Is it okay to ask the Lord to somehow wind back the clock and give you another chance to do it right thing this time?

I had to think about that one. Can God change time? Of course. He can do whatever he wants. Does praying for such a miracle lessen our responsibility to confess our sins, accept the consequences and amend our behavior? Not one little bit. But Scripture never forbids big, hairy, audacious prayers. In fact, if anything, God is impressed by a faith that dares ask for such bold blessings. James chapter 1: When you pray, you “must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord” (vv. 6-7).

Usually, I think we error in the direction of our prayers being small and wimpy. It exposes a faith in a God that is small and not really inclined to do anything for us. We approach God as if his hands are mostly tied by our reality, or as if it would drain him of precious resources that he has to conserve. Or we pray as if he’s stingy, uninterested, mostly indifferent to our plight, and finds us to be bothersome.

But the God I read about in Scriptures loves it when people call on him and are confident he will help. I’m thinking of Jacob. “I will not let you go until you bless me.”

And he got his blessing (Gen. 32). I'm thinking of that Syrophenician woman, Gentile of Gentiles, who said, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." "Great is your faith" Jesus responded, and her daughter was healed from that very hour (Mk. 7). I'm thinking of the Centurion whose servant was paralyzed and in terrible suffering. Jesus said, "I will go and heal him." The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed." That sure impressed Jesus. He said, "I tell you the truth I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith!" And his servant was healed at that very hour (Mt. 8). God loves it when people hold him to his Word and are confident of his power and love.

You can pray for a convenient parking space in front of the hospital and he'll hear that prayer, but why not pray that the person you are there to visit went home that morning cancer free, leaving the doctors collectively scratching their heads? You can pray for a friend that he'll have strength to cope with changes in the work place, and God will hear that prayer. But why not kick it up a few notches and pray that your friend becomes wildly successful in his work, and finds it deeply satisfying as well?

Is there anything too difficult to the Lord? Paul doesn't think so. In our text he says God is "able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine." Let's break that down. First, it means God is able to do all we ask him to do. Second, it means God is even able to all that we dare not ask but merely imagine, like turn back the clock to give us another chance. Third, it means God can do even more than this, far more. God is "able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine."

Paul uses the word "immeasurably" because he doesn't want us putting limits on God's power or love. Once you start measuring something, you are by nature putting a limit on it. You're saying it goes this far, but no further. But there are no such boundaries or limits on God's infinite power or love.

Paul is writing to the church in Ephesus with whom he had spent nearly three years, more than any other mission congregation. The key problem Paul addresses is division between the congregation's Jewish and Gentile members. Remember, the Early Church did not universally or eagerly approve of the mission to the Gentiles. So Paul argues they should never limit God's love, for God's love in Christ is so great no one will ever be able to comprehend it. Just as Abraham was told to look toward heaven and number the stars, so that he might see that numbering them was impossible, so also we can never get to the point where we can say, "Now I know all there is to know about the love of Christ." No. Paul says it has more breadth, length, height and depth than we can understand.

Then, Paul concludes this section with a doxology, a blessing. "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever!"

I think this is hugely relevant, because we live in a society that doesn't expect much from God any more. That's self evident, isn't it? I think it shows up in a lot of ways, in the decline of the church, in the rise of eastern spirituality, even in our language, in the clichés we use. Let me explain.

My friend Charlie came for a visit last month. We've been friends since college, went through seminary together. He's a pastor in the D.C. area. We get together once a year or so.

He's a hoot and his mind is like a trap. He remembers things he doesn't even want to remember. It's kind of fun. Just for kicks sometimes I fill his brain with mostly meaningless data, like a lengthy grocery list, or a phone number and address that we'll need later the next day. The spaghetti sticks to the wall even when he doesn't want it to.

In any event, we were talking about life in our respective parishes, and somewhere along the way he used that oft heard expression: "It is what it is." In reply I said there's something about that phrase that just doesn't sit right. As soon as I said it, I knew it was a mistake, because that's

how he gets back at me. He starts using words and phrases that he knows grate on my ears. We were playing Sheephead. I asked him, "How was the blind?" He said, "Dave . . . it is what it is." Catching up on his son Nick and his less than fulfilling summer job: "It is what it is." One evening I pointed out the chocolate chunks in the ice cream look nothing like the photo on the outside of the carton: "David, never forget this . . . they are what they are." Did I tell you he stayed with us for a week? It did give me opportunity to ponder all the reasons why I dislike the phrase and why I think that popular phrase is a measure of where we are as culture.

Now, maybe there's a place for it. Maybe when your favorite contestant on "So You Think You Can Dance" comes in second place . . . maybe that's a permissible time to use that inane platitude and move on. But when there's a broken relationship with a good friend, for example, or when unwise spending habits have racked up the credit card debt, or when your child is showing signs of getting mixed up with something bad, that is not the time to shrug your shoulder and say, "It is what it is." Because it doesn't need to be what it is! It can be better than what it is! And it's worth trying to make it better! Your church can help with that. I can help with that. The Stephen Ministers can help with that. God can help with that.

Don't say "it is what it is", because it doesn't explain anything, only excuses everything. It reeks of apathy and laziness and sounds like you're shutting down, conceding defeat and abdicating your responsibilities.

Don't say "It is what it is", because maybe you can't find a solution, but look at all the people in here, and the wealth of unique experiences and perspectives. Whatever you're going through, somebody in this room has already been there and can probably help.

Don't say "It is what it is" because that sounds more like Zen Buddhism, looking inward and accepting what is, rather than looking upward to God for help in changing, improving or even fixing what is.

Don't say, "It is what it is" because it makes it sound as if we have no control over things and are just victims of fate. But we are not fatalists who believe all things are predetermined and inevitable. We are Christians who believe God loves the world, intervenes in the world, changes the world, uses us to change the world, and is not done with the world or with us.

Don't text "iiwii" because it just pollutes someone else's phone with bilge, and besides, you can do all things through Christ who gives you strength.

Don't think, "It is what it is" because God has called you to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. If light and salt do anything, they change their environments. Remember, in Holy Baptism the Holy Spirit has made his home within you, and would like to use you as one more tool to change the world for the good and has promised to help you along the way. "Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you" (Deut. 31:6).

Don't say, "It is what it is" because what we are powerless to do God can do. Paul wrote, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8). He already took care of the Big Problem. He's going to help us with the other ones too.

Don't say, "It is what it is" because he has said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Don't even in your posture or tone give the world the impression "It is what it is". And call me on it when I start looking or sounding like that, because I know I can get that way too. But God has promised, "Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint" (Is. 40).

Don't believe for a moment "it is what it is" because God is making all things new (Rev. 21:5), and because God loves you and has shed his blood for you. You are his child,

and as a loving Father he is not content to see your life be less than what he intended it to be. He has said, “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jer. 29:11).

It is what it is? Never! Because “God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.” Amen.

