

More Than We Can Imagine  
Part of the More Than We Can Imagine Sermon Series  
Ephesians 3:7-21  
Rev. Jenny McDevitt  
November 14, 2021  
Dedication Sunday

I feel strongly that you should love the place you live — that wherever you find yourself, you invest yourself in the community. You enjoy all that it has to offer even as you commit to helping improve it. It was in that spirit that I learned about a man named Pearl Fryar in Bishopville, South Carolina.<sup>1</sup> Do you know about him? His garden covers three acres and is filled with living sculptures — roughly 400 topiaries he has trimmed to absolute perfection.

This all began in 1984, when Mr. Fryar learned there was a “Yard of the Month” competition. He decided he was going to win it — but then he was told the competition was only for residents within city limits. His home sat just outside. Reflecting on all this, Mr. Fryar says, “I decided I had to do something so exceptional that they couldn’t help but change the rules.” He went to a nursery where a small, sculpted plant caught his eye. After a few words of instruction from the owner, he took a juniper bush home, cared for it, sculpted it, and never looked back.

He would come home after 12 hours in a canning factory and work deep into the night. He shrugged aside traditional topiary forms — boxes, mazes, or animals, and leaned more toward abstract, organic forms that make you look twice. In 1985, he won Yard of the Month. In the 1990s, he was commissioned by the State Museum here in Columbia. He was featured in a number of art magazines and

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<sup>1</sup> Details about Pearl Fryar and his garden were gathered from a variety of sources, including: [laumeiersculpturepark.org/pearl-fryar](http://laumeiersculpturepark.org/pearl-fryar) and [charlestonmag.com/pearlfryar](http://charlestonmag.com/pearlfryar)

garden publications. The road to his property was expanded to accommodate tour buses that come loaded with tourists from across the globe. In 2006, he won a medal of honor for significant contribution to the arts. That same year, a documentary about him won awards of its own. In 2014, Mr. Fryar celebrated his 75th birthday by being featured on National Geographic. In 2015, the Pearl Fryar Topiary Garden was named one of the top 50 gardens in the country. He is entirely self taught, and works primarily with your standard, run of the mill hedge trimmer. He says, “People call me an artist. I’m just a guy who trims up bushes.” But he is proud of creating something people haven’t seen before. “I want people to find more here than they expected,” he says. “More than they realized was possible.” Of course, here’s one more detail about Mr. Fryar’s garden. That first juniper bush that started it all? He pulled it out of the compost pile at the nursery. Vast portions of his award winning work are shaped from plants other people considered “throwaways” or “leftovers” — the shrubs no one else wanted. “Life is about love,” he says. “If you have love, you’ll discover something more is always possible.”

That was certainly the case for Gareth Hil, who imagined there had to be a better system for kidney transplants.<sup>2</sup> He learned about the limitations of the matching system when his 10

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<sup>2</sup> Information about Gareth Hil and domino transplants was gathered from a variety of sources, including: [nytimes.com/2012/02/19/health/lives-forever-linked-through-kidney-transplant-chain-124.html](http://nytimes.com/2012/02/19/health/lives-forever-linked-through-kidney-transplant-chain-124.html) and [portal.kidneyregistry.org/pages/p674/Guinness\\_Longest\\_Chain.php](http://portal.kidneyregistry.org/pages/p674/Guinness_Longest_Chain.php)

year old daughter suddenly and acutely needed a transplant. A few months after she received that transplant, he formed the National Kidney Registry, creating algorithms that connect patients and donors together across the continent. Which is how, in 2012, a 60-person chain of transplants, over four months, across 17 hospitals in 11 states, resulted in 30 people receiving a new lease on life.

One man, Rick Ruzzamenti, a devout Buddhist, decided to donate a kidney to a stranger. He walked into a hospital and said he had a kidney available, and did they know anyone who needed one. Despite an intensely bitter breakup, a Michigan man donated a kidney for his former girlfriend for the sake of their 2 year old daughter. A woman from Toronto donated for her fifth cousin in Brooklyn, after meeting him by chance in Italy. Children donated for parents, husbands for wives, sisters for brothers. A 26 year old student from Texas gave a kidney for a 44 year old uncle he barely knew. But all of these organs went to complete strangers — because those who had a kidney to give a loved one, weren't a match. So they gave to others, trusting in the ultimate "pay it forward" experiment.

One leap of faith followed another. The most worrisome risk, of course, was that donors would change their mind after their loved ones received kidneys. It didn't happen. Not once. Over 400,000 Americans need a new kidney. Fewer than 17,000 receive one each year. Nearly 5,000 die each year waiting. One-third of transplanted kidneys come from living donors. The reason there aren't more is that a third of the patients who have a willing donor in their life are incompatible with that person — meaning that despite the generous offer, the transplant is impossible. The kidney would be rejected by the recipient's body. And so domino chain transplants were begun. But it was slow going, and chains were small until Garet Hil got involved, certain that more was

possible. With no medical training, he was first considered an interloper by professionals in the field. But, his mathematical background and entrepreneurial energy, when partnered with the medical community, made history and continues to make history. His kidney transplant chain held the world record for years — but just last December, possibly overlooked because of a global pandemic, his organization broke its own record. This time a chain of 70 people resulted in 35 transplants. That chain took half as much time as the original. "The paired exchange process," Mr. Hil says, "has made life possible for more and more people." Asked in an interview if in the early days of his work he ever imagined these sorts of results, he said, "In the early days, all I knew was that I loved my daughter, and that there were hundreds of thousands of others out there loving their daughters and sons and parents and partners." And of course, Mr. Hil's algorithm only works when someone in need of a transplant knows someone who loves them enough to make a sacrifice for a stranger, and when those strangers all agree to trust one another.

Today's scripture reading comes right in the middle of this letter to the church at Ephesus. The first two and a half chapters describe all that God has done in and for that community. The last three chapters instruct the community how they are to live in response. The section Chae read for us is where the whole book hinges together. It's a prayer, really — the author praying for those who would eventually read his words. "I pray that God may strengthen your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you would be able to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love — love that surpasses all knowledge." In other words — "I pray that you would awaken to the truth that Christ lives within you, that the love of Christ is the reason you are alive and your

purpose for living. And I pray that you would somehow — somehow — by grace come to recognize that Christ's love is ultimately more than our human minds can fathom." And then the author writes this: "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever."

Those words are doxology. Praise. And tucked into those words of praise is this little phrase: "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus." To him be glory in the church. The author of these words is convinced that the glory of God is made known not just in the person of Jesus Christ, but also in the body of Christ known as the church. One scholar, thinking about this portion of scripture, puts it this way. He says this makes it clear that "God is already at work in that congregation, and in ours. God's massive, holy power is present even in our fumbling attempts to live faithfully, lovingly, and courageously in the face of our troubles. Our daring prayers to be strengthened in faith to comprehend God's grace are not asking too much. Do not ever make the mistake of thinking our bold prayers can ask too much." Because the love of Christ can accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.

We see glimpses of that here at Shandon all the time. In just the last couple of weeks alone, I have seen it in Bonnie Smith, who asked us to pray for a six year old friend of hers named Mira, who has cancer, and in the ministry of the quilting group, who has made a warm blanket for a little girl they will probably never meet. Nevertheless, every stitch was shaped by love. I have seen that love in the children of our weekday school, who have made stacks and stacks of get well cards for Gerald, our facilities manager, who has been hospitalized with an infection. "Get well," the cards say. "We miss you." "We love you."

"We hope you feel better soon." I have seen that love in Randy Covington, who labors over our international mission giving dollars, wanting to stretch them as far as they can go and then maybe a little farther still; in Jay Rogers and David Roberts and Garrett Humphries, who have examined every square inch of the education building 17 times over, in an effort to make it everything we need it to be for future generations. I have seen that love in Ann Hudson Maynard, who has not yet run out of hugs, despite how freely she gives them away. I have seen that love in the 16 folks who represented our church in the Pride parade, reminding the city and everyone in it that God's love is big enough for everyone — absolutely everyone.

I have seen that love in Byron Duell and Edie and Jim McNeish and Luke Spangler who take turns laboring behind the scenes making microphones and video cameras and online streaming services do all the magical things they do. I have seen that love in the members our Reopening Task Force who agreed to a three or four month commitment ... over a year and a half ago ...but who haven't quit on me yet. I have seen that love in each and every one of you, who show up week in and week out with masks on your faces, not because you love wearing it — I know you don't. But because you do love one another, and you want to keep one another healthy and safe. Again, this is in just the past couple of weeks. I could keep going, but then we'd have to stay for lunch and likely for dinner, and eventually you're going to get hungry.

So let me get practical for just a moment. Today is Dedication Sunday, when many of us turn in pledge cards and offer our financial commitment to the church. We are hoping that our congregation will pledge \$982,282 dollars for 2022. That amount will not just keep our ministry going, but it will allow us to expand and enhance our ministry, for one another, and for the community around us.

Last week I told you I was hoping for a 7.5 percent increase over last year. Others here told me I was thinking too small — that we could make our goal a 10 percent increase over last year. So that's our hope. That's the amount your leadership is dreaming and imagining purposes for. We're already a third of the way there. To those of you who have turned in your pledge cards already — thank you so much. To those of you who will — thank you so much. And, those of you who can't necessarily commit financially, but commit in so many other ways — thank you so much. Simply put — you are the church. And to borrow words from Ephesians, YOU are one of the ways the glory of God is made known in the world.

Now a quick word about a word — “pledge.” We come from lots of different backgrounds. The idea of a pledge card is familiar to many. But not to all. A pledge card is this simple — it is where you write down what you estimate you will give to the church in the coming year. It's not a contract. It can change. You can pledge to give \$10, once. You can pledge to give \$10, every week. You can pledge to give \$1000, every week. There's no right or wrong way to pledge. There's no right or wrong amount to pledge. If it makes you nervous, estimate low, and then give what you can, as you can. If it holds you accountable in a way you find helpful, estimate carefully and then live into it. If you have the resources, and believe that God is at work here, estimate high and help us dream even bigger. We ask you to estimate what you can contribute in part because it helps us plan a budget. But we also ask you to estimate what you can contribute because it helps us all evaluate what matters to us, and what we're willing to invest in — with resources of time, energy, ability, finances, and imagination.

Here's why I'm asking so plainly. I believe Ephesians is right. I believe the church is the way God's glory is known in the world today.

And some churches say that glory looks like love. A lot of churches say that glory looks like something else. This neighborhood, this city, this state, this world — everyone needs to see God's glory the way I have seen it in you.

Pearl Fryar saw a juniper bush tossed in a compost pile. Garet Hil saw 400,000 people in need of an essential organ. So they let their imaginations run wild and the world is better and more beautiful because of it. The end of Ephesians three is the end of a prayer. It says, “Now to him who by the power at work within us...” The power being referred to is love. And Shandon, when it comes to love, you are so powerful. Do you realize that? Do you have any idea how much power you wield? If that powerful love were to be unleashed, it would change even more lives, and it would change your life in even more ways. I believe we'll see it happen. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.