

THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD

(09/17/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 6:1-23

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”

This is the last in our series of Sunday morning reflections on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. I have really enjoyed doing this series as a sort of Bible study. We certainly covered a lot of ground the past few months. For those of you who were not able to be with us in person or online, let me summarize what we learned *about* this book and what we learned *from* this book.

First, biblical scholars are not unanimous in their belief that the Letter to the Ephesians was actually written by the apostle Paul. Many scholars believe that this letter was written by a colleague or disciple of Paul, someone who knew Paul well, knew how Paul thought, knew what Paul believed, and perhaps even accompanied him on his missionary journeys. Since Paul may have been imprisoned by the Roman authorities at the time the letter was written, the colleague may have been writing the letter on Paul’s behalf.

There is also some debate concerning whether this letter was written to a single church or whether it was addressed to Christians in many churches throughout Asia Minor, an area that is now contained within Turkey. Ephesus lies on the shore of the Aegean Sea. It contains the Temple of Artemis, which is one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Since Paul, if he is indeed the author, may have been writing to all the Christian churches of his day, I believe we are not out of line in believing that this letter was written to us and for us.

As we have noted, in his salutation, when Paul addresses “the saints who are in Ephesus,” he is talking about us. He challenges us to think of ourselves as saints and to behave as if we were saints. He tells us that saints are those “who are faithful in Christ Jesus.” Paul is saying that we are all saints “in process.” In our reflections we noted Paul’s choice of words, especially his use of the preposition “in” when speaking of our relationship with Christ Jesus. Paul encourages us to think of ourselves or picture ourselves as being “in” Christ Jesus. This is the same as challenging us to take on the mind and heart of Christ Jesus that it might shape all we think, feel, say, and do.

When we explored the root meaning of the word “redemption,” which Paul uses in this letter, we discovered that to be redeemed is to be restored to our proper position, to regain the true Center of our life. Paul says that Christ “raises us up” when we are fallen.

He tells us that, as redeemed people, as “people who have attained the wisdom that comes to those who know God,” we will see ourselves, our brothers and sisters, and life “with the eyes of our heart enlightened.”

I love this passage: “with the eyes of our heart enlightened.” It reminds me of the line from Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s *The Little Prince*, where the fox tells the little prince,

*It is only with the heart that one can see rightly;
what is essential is invisible to the eye.*

It is only with the heart that we can see rightly; what is essential, eternal, transcendent, is invisible to the eye.

In his letter, Paul unfolds the metaphor of spiritual life and death. He tells us that even if we are physically alive, if we are not “in Christ Jesus” we are spiritually dead. When we are not “filled with the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ,” we become vulnerable to what Paul called the “dark spirit” that is at work in the world and inside us. This dark spirit leads us to think, feel, say, and do things that are contrary to Jesus’ teaching and his Spirit.

Paul tells us that we “are created in Christ Jesus for good works.” He tells us, “Christ breaks down the walls that divide us.” Though Paul is speaking primarily of the division between Jew and Gentile, we can take this teaching to heart in many other areas of our lives as well. Christ seeks to tear down the prejudices that separate us from our brothers and sisters, that keep us from seeing and loving them as children of God.

Paul tells us that the church was created “to be the fulfillment of Christ.” We can think of the church as the mystical body of Christ, incarnating the eternal Christ in the realm of space and time. The church is a dwelling place for God, charged with carrying on God’s healing, reconciling, creative work in the world. Paul carries this one step further when he tells us that each and every one of us is a dwelling place for God. In the words of our childhood hymn, “I am the church; you are the church; we are the church together.” If we could feel this in relation to ourselves and also to each other, we would truly see “with the eyes of our heart enlightened.” We would then see ourselves and other people “through the eyes of love.”

There are several other passages in this letter that we held up as worthy of serious consideration. Several weeks ago, when reflecting on Paul’s statement that “we are saved by God’s grace through faith,” we considered John Wesley’s statement that “faith is the not the same as a belief or any system of beliefs, no matter how true these beliefs

may be.” We then explored the possibility that faith is the quality of our relationship with God. If anything saves us, it will not be our good works or our orthodox belief system, but the quality of our relationship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Christianity is not about belief; it is about relationship, specifically, a relationship of love. As Paul says in his final blessing to his parishioners in Ephesus, “Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Two weeks ago, we explored Paul’s teaching in regard to Spirit, specifically the damage that is done when we engage in a misguided quest for the Holy Spirit through the ingestion of alcoholic spirits. As the psychologist C. G. Jung informed Roland and Bill, two of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, only the true Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit can break the demonic possession of alcoholism.

It seems to me that this is true in other areas of our lives as well. It is through our experience of the Holy Spirit, the experience of being “in Christ” or being a “prisoner of Christ,” that we are healed from the obsessions and compulsions, from all kinds of addictions, from the anger, depression, and general unhappiness that may haunt us.

This morning we turn our attention to Chapter 6, the last chapter of this letter. I like the part about how children should both honor their parents and obey them! Then again, I liked how, in Chapter 5, Paul tells wives that they should be submissive to their husbands as they are to the Lord. This sort of implies that women should regard their husband as a Lord to whom they should be subject. I like this!

Of course, Paul has to spoil everything by going on to say that husbands “should love their wives as they do their own bodies,” and that fathers “should not provoke their children to anger.” I have to admit that when we read what Paul wrote in context, it makes a lot more sense!

In verses 5-9 of the 6th chapter, Paul addresses the relationship of master and slave. He tells slaves to obey their earthly masters “in singleness of heart,” just as they obey Christ. It is hardly surprising that Paul does not challenge the institution of slavery, for slavery was an integral part of his culture and every culture at that point in history. We, at least most of us, are ashamed of the dark history of slavery in our country, and feel we need to challenge the systemic racism that is built into our social and cultural system.

I find it interesting that Paul seeks to make slaves conscious of the difference between their “earthly masters” and Christ. He tells them that ultimately, as Christians, they are to be “slaves of Christ.” A slave of Christ “does the will of God from the heart.”

If both masters and slaves were “prisoners of Christ,” they would both do the will of God from the depths of their heart. The slaveowners, as we know, though they may have attended church regularly, did not always do this. If they did, they wouldn’t own slaves!

Just as he does with husbands in relation to their wives and fathers in relation to their children, Paul tells the master, the one who owns the slave, that he should “render service with enthusiasm.” Paul says that “whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.” This is like karma: what we do to others, whether we are master or slave, will sooner or later come back to us! I like this!

Here is where Paul is so far ahead of his time that he could be considered a social revolutionary! Paul tells the slave owner to stop threatening his slaves “for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.” So much for those who believe that part of God’s plan for humanity is to have some people, people of a darker skin or some distinguishing physical characteristics, serve as slaves to patriarchal, heterosexual, cisgendered, Evangelical, white supremacists. Sorry, guys! This is not what God has in mind for us in this country and around the world!

Paul tells us that Christ tears down the walls that divide us. In Christ there is no partiality. In the words of our closing hymn this morning, “In Christ there is no East or West.” This means that at the deepest level there is no black or white, no male or female, no heterosexual or homosexual, no slave or free, no Jew or Gentile. We are all just children of God, incarnations of God’s creative Spirit! In the words of our closing hymn this morning, we are, or we should be, “one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.”

Finally, Paul tells his parishioners to “be strong in the Lord.” He tells us that when we are going into battle with the “dark spirit” that threatens to rule the world and also us, we should put on “the whole armor of God.”

I believe there is a power of evil in the world. I also believe there is a power of evil, a potentiality for evil within each and every one of us. I believe we become vulnerable to this power of evil, this destructive power, when we become self-centered rather than Christ-centered. We open ourselves to this demonic power when we place our needs and our happiness in the center of our universe.

Not everyone believes there is a power of evil in the world. One of the basic streams of theology in the Christian church is that evil is simply the absence of good; this is the doctrine of *privatio boni*. However, if there were no evil, how could three members of the Ku Klux Klan, following then-governor George Wallace’s pledge

“segregation forever,” have planted a bundle of dynamite under the steps leading into the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama on September 15, 1963? This explosion killed four little Black girls: Carol Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins, and Cynthia Wesley, and seriously wounded Sarah Collins Rudolph. As I have mentioned before, when Darlene and I visited the Heritage Museum and the Lynching Memorial in Montgomery Alabama last year, we were both struck by the power of evil, a dark force we hadn’t experienced since our two visits to the concentration camp at Dachau, just outside Munich.

Paul tells us that not only is evil a force in the world and within us; he calls us to take a stand against it. He tells us not to play around with it, not to open ourselves to its presence. Augustine, whose theology revived Paul’s teachings, knew what Paul meant when he tells us to take a stand against evil.

Before Augustine found Christ, which happened largely through the ministrations of his mother, he enjoyed going to the coliseum where he watched the gladiators kill each other or he watched the Christians be torn to pieces by wild beasts. After his experience of Christ, he vowed not to go to the coliseum any more. His friends, however, would not let him go that easily! They bodily carried him with them to the coliseum.

In his *Confessions*, Augustine relates what he was thinking as his friends carried him into the stadium and sat him down in a seat. He vowed that even through they could carry his body there, they could not make him open his eyes. The action began, the crowd roared, and Augustine opened his eyes to take a peek. Before he knew what was happening, he was yelling as loudly as anyone else as “he drank with avid pleasure” the massacre that was occurring before his eyes. The power of evil had taken possession of him! Just like the power of an addiction--if you give it an inch it will take your life, and it will do a heck of a lot of damage along the way!

Paul tells us that we will have our own temptations in life. When we are tempted to think, feel, say, or do something that is not consonant with the will of Jesus, something that does not arise from the heart and mind of Jesus, we should take a stand against it.

Paul says we should “fasten the belt of truth around our waist.” This means we should tell the truth—both to ourselves and to others. The psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, in his interesting book on the reality of evil entitled *People of the Lie*, says that, in his experience, people who are evil are invariably pathological liars. They make up an alternative reality of which they then become convinced and which they try to sell to others. Lying is the first step to evil.

Paul says we should “don the breastplate of righteousness.” This means that we should take a stand on what we know is right. When something is wrong, we should speak up! We should take a stand against it! As Mahatma Gandhi said, “In order for evil to triumph, it is only necessary for good people to do nothing.” At all levels of government, we need our votes to be congruent with our Christian values.

Paul tells us that we should “take the shield of faith,” with which we will be able to “quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” He tells us to “take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” If we do this, we will be prepared for any battle, either outside us or inside us.

Finally, Paul says that we should “pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.” Note, once again, Paul’s use, his choice of words. Paul does not say that we should pray “to” the Spirit but that we should pray “in” the Spirit. Once again, if we place ourselves within Christ, if we are “in” Christ, if we are “filled with the Spirit of Christ,” our prayers will be true and deep and meaningful!

I leave this series, and I leave you now with Paul’s words of benediction to the Ephesians: “Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.” Amen.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.

RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

As we heard this morning, in the final verse of the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians, Paul says,

Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is Paul’s blessing to his parishioners in all the churches that he founded or helped found throughout Asia Minor.

What Paul is saying to his people is so simple. He calls them to feel, to nurture, and then to manifest “an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.” He calls them to a

deeper relationship with their Lord, the deepest relationship possible—a relationship of love!

Paul tells us that this is what it means to be a Christian. There is a catch, however. How can we be a Christian and not share what we have with those in need? How can we be a Christian and not help to build up the church, the mystical body of Christ? Paul tells us that if our faith is grounded in a deep and loving relationship with our Lord, our life will be filled with grace.

Let us now consecrate our morning offering, our mission offering, and the many gifts we joyfully share with our church and with this world for the furtherance of God's kingdom on earth.