

Sermon for 25 August 2024

St. Luke/San Lucas

1 Kings 8:1,6,10-11,22-30,41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

We've come to the end of the series of gospel reading related to bread, and tempting though it is to continue with that theme, a couple of other phrases in our gospel today caught my eye. When the disciples heard Jesus' teaching, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you?"

This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?

Does this offend you?

Do we find Jesus' teachings difficult? Do they offend us?

Do we find our preachers' words difficult? Do they offend us?

Do we find church difficult? Are we offended by what we see, by what we heard, by what we experience? By what is done, or perhaps, not done?

You may have already figured out, this is not going to be a comfortable sermon, not for me to give or, perhaps for you all to hear, but sometimes, sometimes, we need to tackle the difficult, we need to work through our discomfort, to examine what offends us and why we are offended.

With this in mind, I'd actually like to take a look, not at our gospel reading, but at our epistle. As a child, I had to memorize bible verses for Sunday school and for our religion

class at school. We began with single verses, then segments, and worked our way up to whole chapters. Ephesians 6 is one of the first whole chapters I had to memorize, in the King James Version, of course, and so, if I stumble over the wording at times, please know it's because I've spent over forty years with it engraved in my mind, just with slightly different phraseology.

This section of Ephesians 6 contains warlike imagery, a description of “the whole armor of God” with which we are to cloth ourselves in order to stand against the wiles of the devil, against rulers, against authorities, against cosmic powers, against spiritual wickedness in high places. The imagery, the language, the very sound and rhythm of the verses brings to mind wars and conflict and destruction.

For me as a child, memorizing these verses, I pictured, not the Roman soldier that our teachers put on the flannel board, but the cartoon superheroes of the day. Batman with his solid breastplate, his flowing cape and his helmet with ears. Wonderwoman with her lasso of truth and her wide, protective belt. Larger than life characters, capable of wielding their power against evil, using their force to conquer, to destroy, the devils, the cosmic powers, the villains of their day.

Revisiting this passage as an adult, having spent many hours wrestling, to be honest, struggling, with some of Jesus' difficult words, with some of Peter and Paul's hard-to-understand passages, with the New Testament habit of putting unexpected twists into texts, I am fairly sure that my original understanding of these verses completely missed the author—and God's—point. So, I'd like to invite you to journey with me, and to take another look at this passage, at this armor, piece by piece.

The author of Ephesians calls on us to stand firm, with our loins girt about with truth or, in our more modern translation, fastening the belt of truth about our waist. Now, I think we are all familiar with the ten commandments, and their mandate not to lie. We know that, in our own words, with our own actions, we are to be honest, forthright, truthful. But let's take that a bit further.

Are we honest with our society? Do we seek out the truth, the uncomfortable truth around us? For example, do we see the unhoused on our street corners or do we look the other way as we drive by? Do we examine what is causing homelessness? What is it about our social, economic, political systems that leaves people without shelter? Are we ready for that truth, that uncomfortable, difficult, offensive truth, that not everyone is okay in our world today?

And, as we continue our search for a priest, are we ready to take a truthful look at our community here today? Are we ready to celebrate all those wonderful, generous, loving things that our church provides? Are we also ready to look with truthful, caring, and honest eyes at those areas where we are perhaps, just perhaps, not living up to Jesus' words, where we are still a work in progress. Yes, this is difficult. We may even be offended. Are we willing to stand firm in these truths?

And that's just the first item of armor. There's more, and some of it may be even more difficult, more uncomfortable. The author of Ephesians next urges us to put on the breastplate of righteousness. Now, righteousness is a very churchy word. For me, it brings to mind those paintings of saints with halos and slightly tortured expressions, gazing into the sky. A more modern, accessible translation might be for us to put on the protective vest of right living. This is a call to do the right thing.

Once again, I think most of us try to live a righteous life, we try to do the right thing. Speaking for myself, I often fail to meet my ideal standard of perfection (that patience thing is still a definite work in progress) but I do try hard to live right, to show love, to not do harm.

But is that enough? Is that sufficient to overcome all those fiery darts of the wicked that Ephesians addresses? What if we expand our right living not just to our individual actions, but also to our communal efforts? Once again, an example. Is our criminal justice system an example of right living? Does it combine justice with mercy? Does it treat all who come before it equally?

And are we, as a religious community, actively engaged in right living? Are we feeding the hungry, caring for the widows and orphans, showing love and respect to all persons? Yes, we are doing some of that, but are we doing enough? Are we working at changing those aspects of our society that contribute to poverty in the first place? More of those difficult, uncomfortable, questions.

The next piece of clothing is one of my favorites—the shoes. The King James calls on us to have feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace, while our New Revised Standard language tells us that our shoes for your feet (really, where else would we put them?), anyway, our shoes should be whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.

The Thursday Crew, our wonderful group of volunteers who spend hours taking care of our buildings and grounds, recently renovated the Fireside Room downstairs. First, we removed all the old, broken furniture. Then we took everything off the walls and washed away years of dirt—and a lot of the old paint as well. This was followed by spackling and repairing the holes, sanding and smoothing the walls, taping the edges, and then, finally, we got to paint. The preparation easily took three to four times as long as the actual painting. And that's true with so many projects—painting, home repair, gardening, music. To accomplish any of these, one must invest hours of often hard work in preparations.

Do we put in the same type of effort at peace? Do we invest time in de-escalation training? Do we study and practice compassionate, active listening? Are we open to changing the way we communicate, the way we express ourselves, the way we talk to each other, in order to reduce conflict? And, in those moments when we are offended, are we ready to

work through those emotions, weigh carefully our words, and work toward peace? This is not easy stuff, but it is what we are called upon to do.

And now we get to one of my favorite parts, the quenching of those fiery darts of the wicked, using a shield, a shield of faith. Although there is some discussion among experts, many think that Roman soldiers used to place their leather shields in water before battles, to make them more fire-resistant. Do we regularly protect ourselves with faith? When we are confronted with challenges in life, with anger or hatred, confusion or hurt, do we reach for our faith? Do we regularly take actions that strengthen our faith, do we dip our shield in the water of our baptism, holding firm to God's promises, promises of love, of strength, of comfort?

Take the helmet of salvation. Interesting. I've always thought of salvation as more of an emotional thing, yet here, it is a head covering, protection for our intellect, our mind. Are we able to believe in salvation to such an extent that we can withstand bombardments of negativity, of fearmongering? We have been promised salvation, for by grace are you saved through faith. It is a gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. We have salvation. It is ours. But have we taken the action of putting it on our heads? We have it, but are we using it, not just to protect ourselves, but to actively quench those fiery darts?

At last, we come to my favorite part (yes, I like the shoes, but let's admit it, swords have always seemed like a lot of fun). So, we have the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. My experience with swords is extremely limited, but it did actually come up once when I was on the school board in Moscow. Now, the international school there, as with most schools, had a rule against weapons on campus. One year, we received a request for a waiver. One of the students was a member of the Russian Junior National Fencing Team, and she wanted to bring her swords to school so that she could practice during P.E. Her coaches and parents made the argument that she needed to spend more time with the sword in her hand, so that it could become, not a tool with which she fought, but rather an extension of her body. Something that was so nature, so ingrained, in her that she would feel naked or unbalanced without it.

Do we have that same relationship with scripture? Is it so much a part of our lives that we don't even need to think about it, that it becomes second-nature, a part of our being? Are we familiar enough with scripture that, when we are faced with something in life, we can call to mind a verse, a story, a lesson that relates to what we are facing?

I invite you to do a little experiment. If I say the word "love," can you think of a scriptural reference? Not chapter-and-verse, but the idea. God so loved the world. Faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love. Or love your neighbor as yourself.

Okay, now, what if I say the word "envy," or if you grew up with King James, "covetousness?" One of the ten commandments—as in, don't do it. What about our Old Testament reading

from a few weeks ago, when David coveted Bathsheba, someone else's wife—not just a commandment but an illustration of what happens when we covet something or someone.

Do we know enough scripture, have we spent enough time with our Bible, that it becomes an extension of ourselves, a part of ourselves? Do we sleep with it, dream of it, meditate on it, day and night?

As Jesus noted to his disciples, these teachings are difficult. They can cause offense. In fact, our gospel states that many of the disciples who had been following Jesus turned back and no longer went with him. Only a few, the twelve, stayed, and even among them was the one who would betray Jesus.

But here's the important part, God loves us. God has given us the gift of salvation. Yes, God challenges us. God gives us difficult tasks in this world. God may even speak bluntly at times, causing offense. But God never, ever, ever, deserts us. When we fail—and we will—God is still there, lifting us up, waiting with open arms as we try again.

Our job in all this—to accept God's gift, to believe in God's love, and to try, always to try, to put on that armor of truth, of right living, of peace, of faith, of salvation, of the Word of God. To stand firm and, when our own strength fails, to know that God is there. Amen.