

Ephesians 6:10-20 Sermon
Year B/13th after Pentecost/8-22-21

In the letter to the church in Ephesus we have learned about “Being Church” --- living as a new and unified people who are part of Christ’s body. This morning, while we come to the concluding portion of this correspondence, we hear the writer using vivid imagery and urgent language to summarize major points that he spoke to earlier in the letter, **and** he ends the letter in a similar manner to the way he began --- with prayer. Listen now for a word from God for your life as I read the NRSV of Ephesians 6:10-20 where the church is told to “be strong in the Lord and put on the whole armor of God so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Ephesians 6:10-11) --- and to “pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication” (Ephesians 6:18).

The way the writer begins this final lesson to the church reminds me of when I was a teacher. If we, the class and I, were going to study and learn about a specific topic for all or part of a grading period I would plan the unit of study with a central goal that was accompanied with objectives that spoke to how we were to accomplish that goal. On day one, the overall aim of our learning experience was announced, and then at the beginning of each week the students were given a summary of expected learning outcomes along with how understanding would be checked. Each lesson was linked to the previous one, and a variety of methods were used to make sure we were **all** ready for the next step. Teach, review, check for understanding, then proceed – **that** was the method. This was the M.O. I used in the schools where I worked, **and** it seems they can also be applied as part of the teaching/learning process in the life of this body.

As we have learned together throughout the letter to the church in Ephesus, we have followed the writer with a focus on “Being Church” and living the Christian life **and** have come to understand “the church does not exist by

accident --- it has a specific purpose as part of God's creative and reconciling plan" (Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 557-573). As our review for this morning, biblical scholar, Mark Allan Powell writes

God's plan for the church is that all things are united in Christ – a new humanity is created – and we as the church are to reveal this mystery of unity in Christ to the world and indeed to the cosmic powers of the universe. We are marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit and as the church we are to live in unity and peace. Keep in mind this letter is not a denominational correspondence but rather is addressing the church universal --- **all** people who have been reconciled with God through Christ. We have learned each person has been given gifts that help us function as the church, and **all** of us are entrusted to carry out the ministry of the ecclesial body. The purpose of church leaders --- pastors, elders, and deacons --- is to equip the saints for the work of ministry so that all may come to experience God's plan for unity in its fullness. As we approach the lesson for today, we are reminded the oneness of the church seems to supply the standard for moral conduct found in Ephesians: all of the 36 ethical imperatives provided in 4:1-6:20 appear related to the affirmation that "we are members of one another" (4:25). Accordingly, believers should treat each other as extensions of themselves, an abstract reality of the Golden Rule. The point is not simply that you should "do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matt. 7:12); the point **now** is - that what you do to others you actually do to yourself" (Powell, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 334-338).

Through the Holy Spirit, life lived in God is marked by behaviors, that as members of the church, we are to live from now on. Truth, justice, peace, faith create a type of protection --- God's armor if you will --- that provides strength so that as members of this ecclesial body we can stand firm against the forces and deceptions of evil. Now the evil the writer is speaking of is more than our **not** loving neighbor --- even though, that is a symptom of malice. No, here we are talking about immorality that exists at the societal or system level --- such as racism or any of the other "isms" that exist and reflect intolerance against any one or any idea that deviates from the

dominate social norms or world views **and** results in discrimination that extends far beyond color and national origin. This is prejudice that also includes sexual orientation, issues surrounding COVID-19, inequity against women, and other issues that cause division and intolerance within God's good creation. Brothers and sisters in Christ we are **one** body, a group that names Christ as our head, and we are called to oneness in God **and** each other --- remembering, when we hurt the other we are really hurting self. On our own, it is futile for any of us to attempt to resist the seductive nature of any type of evil that reinforces my looking inward and seeking what is best for me or gives me more power. It quite simply is beyond our capacity to oppose evil. No, in order for us to be the church, a body created to the glory of God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus --- we must acknowledge two things: First, we firmly stand in God's truth, justice, peace, and faith that are counter to the power of evil, and second it is only through God's Spirit that claims and calls us to put on the whole armor of God that we can have **any** hope of overpowering the forces of "rulers, authorities, the cosmic power of this present darkness, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

The writer of this letter closes with an essential component of "Being Church" and living the Jesus way of life, and that is to "pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication" (Ephesians 6:18). Not only does the writer commend prayer to the church; he also practices it as well --- just as King Solomon did as he prayed at the dedication of the temple. Listen, to the writer of the epistle to the Ephesians as he prays ---

- "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers" (Ephesians 1:15-16).

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Over the past few days and weeks, the consequence and capacity of “Being Church” through prayer have been made abundantly clear to me all over again, as I have been asked or prompted through conversation to pray

- for ICU nurses who are depressed, overworked, and angry,
- for people struggling with mental health issues that incapacitate and marginalize one to the verge of suicide,
- for a young woman who is homeless and addicted to drugs that her time in a half-way house will restore and heal her,
- for children and teachers beginning a school year that is new in many different ways,
- for people who have had or are waiting for organ transplants,
- for people who are incapable of being content with their life and work, and
- to give thanks for family, friends, food, and fellowship. (PAUSE)

As the church, we are encouraged to see prayer as “a ministry of intercession,” to quote the side note found in the *Spiritual Formation Bible*.

The annotation goes on to say

the writer of Ephesians offers three helpful guidelines for rooting our lives in prayer: depending on the Spirit, praying wherever we are, and using different forms and methods. He reminds us that prayer confronts and weakens the powers of darkness (v12) that seek to destroy God’s love --- love that calls us to pray for others, interceding in love for those who are:

- struggling with depression or doubt
- facing persecution and turmoil
- seeking to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ
- trying to find hope and direction
- wrestling with failing health.

Establish this habit of intercessory prayer by writing the name of at least one person on each day of your planning calendar for the next month to remind you to pray for others (*Spiritual Formation Bible*, 1546).

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This is a habit I have started to do.

I believe as we pray for one another --- especially as we pray for people and situations we do not understand or support --- kindness and unity develop between the one praying and the one prayed for – that we are joined together to repel the forces of evil as we come before God and speak the joys and concerns that we have been entrusted to express.

“Being church” is remembering in your mind and heart to at all times put on the whole armor of God, to stand firm against evil, and to pray through the Spirit for others.

The final verses of Ephesians, though not part of our reading, offer a proper closing to God’s word for us this morning. “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” (Ephesians 6:23-24).

As we pray, I would like to use the Prayer for the Readers of Ephesians found in chapter 3:14-21. Let us pray.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

20 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. Amen.