

Sermon Sunday, January 3, 2016
“May the Eyes of Your Heart Be Enlightened”

Good Morning and Welcome to this Sacred Space.

My name is Eileen Epperson and I am a Presbyterian minister living here in Salisbury. It is my joy to be your January minister here while Pastor Diane Monti-Catania is on a month-long sabbatical.

I am very happy to be here. I have had a fun as well as productive week in the office and have learned more about how this church operates and the good folks who keep it going.

A little about me:

I have been ordained 25 years as a Presbyterian Teaching Elder (aka minister). Over these years, I have been a college chaplain, a parish minister, a hospital and a hospice chaplain. I am a trained interim minister and have served five churches in three states in that capacity. I was the settled minister in a Congregational church in Torrington ten years ago.

For the last two years I have been the hospice chaplain for SVNA and a bereavement counselor locally and in Litchfield. I see people individually for spiritual direction.

I live one minute from here by car in the house where I've lived for eleven years. Five months ago, I got my first dog, Max, and you will definitely hear more about him.

I was married for ten years and then my husband and I reconfigured our relationship into an abiding friendship. We have each other's backs.

When ships appear on the open sea, their flag lets people know what they are about and where are coming from. I'd like to tell you what is on my flag and where I am coming from. I have two primary commitments inside of my discipleship:

1. Bringing about, participating in and causing our world to be compassionate, interconnected and interdependent.
 - a. One area in which I work for that goal is with interfaith dialogue and multi-faith cooperation. I am an Ambassador for the Parliament of the World's Religions.
 - b. I am a spiritual director and I like to design retreats and seminars and workshops and conversations that help people grow their interior lives and their experience of connection to God.
 - c. A second area is in facilitating communication between men and women. Helping them create real partnerships in all areas of life, public and private. Several years ago I discovered a series of programs created by a remarkable woman who started researching men 20 years ago when her own relationships kept floundering. She asked a question which I try to remember in many parts of life:

“What if no one is misbehaving? Neither men, nor women. Why are men and why are women doing what they are doing?”

2. In all things, being a faith-filled and willing agent of Christ, obedient to him alone.

What I love to do:

1. Co-design and facilitate retreats and Quiet Days and seminars for the growth of the interior life.
2. Crochet and knit.
3. Inquire and wonder about things, people, situations and ideas. Currently, inquiring into “holiness” in my Spiritual Books discussion group.
4. Love being in school and I am a first year D. Min. at Hartford Seminary, a year behind Pastor Diane. This is handy as she can loan me her books and give me some pointers.
5. Love to read. I love silence. I love parties.
6. I enjoy the banquet of our local cultural activities: music, theatre, Scoville Library offerings and exploring museums. Forty years ago I taught modern dance and I really enjoy seeing dance performances.
7. Like to act in community theatre
8. I love my dog!

I would love to meet you and learn what you are up to *and up against* in your life. Please call or just come by. I am in the office from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. and accessible at any time, including evenings. My phone is in the bulletin. We are focusing on Ephesians this morning. It is one of the epistles in the Greek scriptures, the Christian New Testament.

Over the centuries of Biblical scholarship, there have been different foci: the historicity and authenticity of scripture. Who is the historical Jesus? Other times the emphasis has been on the metaphors, myths and stories in scripture as life giving. Or the normative and instructive aspects of scripture have been the focus.

There are seven letters that scholars have decided are authentic Pauline letters and some of these scholars argue that Ephesians is not one of them. For this reflection, authorship is not a concern. The letter is short and I recommend that you read the six chapters, rich in poetic language and exhortation: “Lead a life worthy of your calling.” “Be angry but sin not.” “Live as children of light.” “You are created for good works.” “Speak the truth in love.” “Expose the unfruitful works of darkness.” “Be renewed in the spirit of your minds.” “May the eyes of your heart be enlightened.”

The letter was apparently addressed to non-Jews, i.e. Gentiles. It is unusual in that it does not address a crisis or concern of a particular church. It may have been sent to the church in Ephesus but also as a general letter to many churches. There are practical instructions for living in harmony as families and as church community, as well as featuring lofty, cosmic language.

It is important to remember that as we keep discovering who we are as Christians and as our understanding of the faith changes over time, so did the early church unfold during the first century. Beginning during the lifetime of Jesus, we see an expanding understanding of the market share for whom the Good News was intended.

What was the Good News? I would say, in essence, that is it this: we are each one of us loved 100% for being, not doing anything. Whether we feel it, believe it or subscribe to it, we are 100% loved. And non-Jews are included.

As we prepare for Holy Communion, I want to highlight three ideas from Ephesians:

1. If you want to grow your interior life and spirit, you must adopt practices and practice them (the following appear in Ephesians).
 - a. Put away falsehood (catch those white lies!)
 - b. Be angry but sin not; don't let the sun go down on your anger (that way you won't have to have a forgiveness session with me because you won't be storing resentment)
 - c. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths (don't gossip, as much fun as that is)
 - d. Practice being kind, tender-hearted and forgiving (it won't always be the first thing that comes to mind)
 - e. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness but expose them (this could lose you so-called friends)
2. There is enormous relief, freedom and healing in admitting one's sins, forgiving oneself and others, asking forgiveness and making amends. It's keeping secrets that diminishes our vitality (chap 2).
 - a. When we hide what we feel is misconduct or bad thoughts, we start shutting down inside, a little bit at a time. I think this is what is meant with the words, "You were *dead* through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world...." We do that, kill ourselves off over time by holding on to resentments and regrets *and hiding them*. But if you do not let the sun set on your upset, you are practicing a very life-giving habit.
3. To be an authentic disciple of Eternal One, find out and claim your gifts and then share them with your communities (chap 4).
 - a. Being shy about claiming our gifts and being unwilling to ask others what we do best when we haven't a clue, is not being modest; it's being stingy. We don't have time for that, my friends. Right this hour, we all need each other very much. We need each other's gifts front and center to manifest the Kingdom of Love and Light. This church needs your gifts. More importantly, the church is a launching pad for you to share those gifts in the public arena, where it's risky to be honest and kind and tender-hearted and to expose the fruits of darkness; volunteering, at work, in New York City, in the subways.

So, we begin a month together. Come and see me. Call me. Tell me about your practices and I will share mine with you. Tell me about your victories over your less admirable sides and I'll tell you mine and we'll rejoice together.

AMEN