

Sunday, August 26, 2012
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For today's reading we turn to Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Scholars believe that Paul's followers wrote this letter, along with Colossians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus and 2 Thessolians, after his death toward the end of the first century.

These letters have a somewhat different tone, less personal, than the authentic Pauline letters.

The writer encourages the Ephesian believers to recognize that their struggle is not against human beings, but against spiritual forces of evil, and in order to stay strong they need to put on God's armor and remain faithful in prayer.

Then he asks them to pray for him as he seeks to spread the Gospel.

The reading is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians 6:10-20

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. May He add to our hearing and understanding, his blessing. Amen..

Sermon - "Put on the Armor of God"

As the summer winds down, we approach the end of our study of Paul's letters.

As I was reflecting on this, I realized that I hadn't really touched on some of the more difficult texts from Paul.

I felt remiss that I didn't bring up those verses from Paul's letters that are so often taken out of context and used to manipulate or alienate people.

So, today, we will look at the whole letter to the Ephesians, rather than just one passage, for it contains much of the controversial teachings often attributed to Paul.

As I mentioned in the introduction, this letter is not considered authentic to Paul and is likely to have been written by his followers.

What we have here is one of the first examples of 'interpretation' by someone other than an original source.

Jesus, of course, didn't write anything down.

He taught by telling stories, by examples, by parables, by simply living in a way that the people around him understood his message.

Later, after the death and resurrection of Christ, the tradition was still one of oral history.

Mark's gospel, which is believed to be the earliest, was written in the late 60's of the first century almost 30 years after Christ's death.

Today's reading is chronologically placed toward the end of the first century.

The tone of the letter focuses much more on the church itself rather than on the coming Kingdom of God.

Perhaps, the writers have grown frustrated with the unfulfilled promise of Jesus' return.

They have turned their attention to getting the church organized and functioning.

When we study scripture it is important that we look at what it was saying at the time it was written – the historical context, as well as looking at what it might be saying to us today.

Much of this letter is timeless in its relevance to our lives,

demonstrating that the issues that challenge us are similar to those that our ancestors struggled with.

In the early part of the letter, the writer reminds the Ephesians that it is *By grace they have been saved-through faith which is not their own doing, but a gift from God.*

Grace and salvation through Jesus Christ are available to everyone-regardless of status, background, and cultural upbringing.

The church is to be open to all no longer divided into different factions, but one being in Christ.

In the fourth chapter we hear these words,

“Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

These words are part of our ordination service in the United Church of Christ, reminding those of us who take on the role of minister, that we are not only called to serve, but to do so in a way that models our Christian values.

You, however, are also called to a particular life – whatever your vocation might be and you, too, are called to live in a way that demonstrates humility, gentleness, patience and love.

Further on in chapter four the writer speaks directly to our society today, particularly in this election year, when he says,

“We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way to him who is the head, Jesus Christ.”

Again, we are reminded that we must understand what it is that we believe and then stand firm in those beliefs.

Regardless of what we hear in the media, we must make up our own minds – we must be committed, unwaveringly, to the truth.

The question, of course is how do we do this?

The writer suggests that we be imitators of God, avoiding all behaviors that would keep us from God.

We are to live as ‘children of the light.’

In enumerating how this might be done, we find many of the passages that are frequently misrepresented.

First, “*Wives be subject to your husbands.*”

This however is only half of the sentence and only a fraction of the paragraph. The whole passage says,

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

The relationship between husband and wife is to be modeled on Christ’s relationship to us, to the church.

It is with respect, love and awe that we are to approach one another.

In the next chapter we find “*Slaves, obey your earthly masters.*”

Again this is only a fragment – upon which countless lives have been enslaved.

The entire message however says, *Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free. And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.*

This is a good example of where historical interpretation is important. People owned slaves in this society and this letter is not an endorsement of slavery, rather a call for those people who own slaves or are enslaved to remember that they are children of God – a God who loves them.

Both of these examples teach us to listen for the whole story. Don’t be fooled by catchy phrases or innuendo.

Seek the truth –always seek the truth.

Finally, we come to the passage we read this morning.

Here we are called to prepare ourselves to live in a world where we will be continually faced with choices between good and evil.

The writer encourages us to remember that God’s power is greater than any challenge we might face.

Using the metaphor of military garb of the day we are encouraged to employ truth, righteousness, proclamation, faith, salvation and peace to ward off evil-in whatever guise it presents itself.

Finally, the writer encourages us to use prayer to bolster our relationship with God.

Everyday of our lives we are faced with the choice to remain faithful to Christ or to turn away. The ancient writers knew, as we know today that we need the intimacy with God that comes through prayer and through sharing in the life of Christ to remain true to our calling.

We come to church to be reminded, to be encouraged, to get the armor that we need to fight the battles that come our way.

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians closes with these words,

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 our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God, we know that you provide everything that we need to live as children of the light. Grant us the grace to accept the gifts that you bring. Help us to live our lives *with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* Help us to speak the truth in all matters and to treat our fellow human beings with dignity and respect.

Hear our prayers this day for those whom we love. We pray for Theresa, Don, Gloria, Kit, Michelle, Peter, Warren, MaryClare, Ryan, Christine, Michael, Hilda, Sal

May your healing touch be upon each one.

We pray for those who grieve that they might know your comfort.

We pray for all of our young people in transition-that your voice will be the loudest one they hear.

We pray for people throughout the world who live in poverty, hunger and fear. May peace prevail in your world.

Hear us now, in the silence, as we turn our hearts to you.

Jesus taught them to pray in these words....