

August 26, 2018

Ephesians 6: 10-20

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Consider Your Shoes”

I want to begin the preaching this morning the way we begin worship every Sunday. After words of welcome and announcement we move about and greet one another, sharing the peace of Jesus Christ. Maybe that’s exactly what you did at the start today, shared Christ’s peace but you may have also exchanged other greetings saying, “Good Morning” or “It’s good to see you” or “How are you doing today.” These are kind words and the Lord knows the world can use more kindness. Any opportunity to speak kind words is helpful. But, I’m inviting us to focus, once more, on peace, the peace Christ gives and the peace we share because of Christ. So, let’s practice it again, sharing Christ’s peace with those around us. As you are able, move about and go to those you know and to those you don’t know, and be intentional in saying to one another, “The peace of Christ be with you...And also with you.”

We practice the sharing of peace this morning because it reminds us that we belong to Christ. There are many other passions in this world that lay claim to us. We belong to organizations that expect our loyalty as members of clubs or business groups or teams. We affiliate with political parties and social movements. We identify with religious communities like The United Methodist Church and we profess loyalty to our families or other important relationships. These circles of belonging reflect what is important to us and how we see ourselves in the world. Others know who we are because of where we belong. Many of us are getting to know our new Youth Ministries Director, Hannah Ewald. We’re so happy Hannah is part of our ministry team. When Hannah and I first met we shared some things about ourselves. She noted she was a graduate of Otterbein University and I said, “I’m a graduate of Otterbein.” And then, I learned her mother is an ordained clergy in the United Methodist Church and I said, “Hey, I’m a preacher’s kid, too.” Right away Hannah and I discovered we have circles of belonging in common and this communicated who we are, one to the other. All of us have connections like this and they shape us, and communicate what others can know about us but before all of that, before we claim to belong to any other person or place or thing, we belong to Christ.

Today God speaks to us out of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. We’ve read from chapter six but I drifted back in the letter to the apostle’s opening words. Early on, Paul describes the Christians in Ephesus as “saints who are in Christ” (Eph 1:1) He writes that the members of the Ephesian church are chosen to be “in Christ” and they set their hope “on Christ” and there is the “immeasurable greatness” of Christ’s power working in them. Over and over again, Paul affirms that the early Christian community belongs to Christ. This is the truth that shapes their priorities, their passions, and their destiny. Paul wants the Ephesians to be certain of their Christ connection and he wants us to be just as clear. Imagine the impact it would have in how we go about our business in the world if our Christ connection led the way in what we share with others about ourselves. “Hi,” we say as we introduce ourselves. “It’s nice to meet you.” And what would it mean if we followed those words with these, “I belong to Christ”? What if the response that came back was, “Yeah, me too, I belong to Christ!”? Imagine the direction our conversations would take if instead of saying “I’m a graduate of this place or that place, or I’m a Buckeye, or I’m a Republican, or a Democrat, or a professional, or a parent, we would first say ‘I belong to Christ.’” This truth about ourselves is not just who we are in God’s eyes. This is who we are in the world and Paul writes to keep us strong in the Lord.

Whenever we read from Paul we feel challenged because the complexity of his words can be confusing. Paul’s intent is not to confuse us. He wants to be clear. Belonging to Christ makes a difference in life and nowhere is Paul more clear of this than the words we read today. “Finally,” he writes, “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.” (Eph 6:10) To make his point, Paul says we wear what he calls the “armor of God.” (Eph. 6:10) We wear helmet and belt and breastplate and sword. Paul believes that our Christ connection protects us in this faith. He implies that our commitment to Jesus puts us in conflict with the powers and authorities of the world. Now, this isn’t war like we usually think of war. Paul isn’t talking about soldiers attacking or armies battling one another. Being in Christ creates a spiritual conflict for us. When Christ leads the way the love of Jesus pushes against the world’s way where dominance and defeat creates winners and losers. We put on the “armor of God” so that we can stay strong in God’s way. This means that when our faith is challenged, when our spiritual commitment is questioned, or our desire to stay connected to Jesus is devalued or tossed aside, we are wrapped in God’s presence. With God as our protection from head to foot, writes Paul, we can withstand every threat.

Now, we know Paul’s military sounding language has led to some misinterpretations throughout the ages. There is no more clear example of this in Christian history than The Crusades. There are a variety of opinions about what motivated The Crusades. The crusades were a church-sanctioned war in the Middle Ages against the largely Muslim presence throughout Europe and the Middle East. As I’ve said, historians interpret this in different ways.

Some see the Crusades as an important affirmation of papal authority throughout the land. Others see them as a misuse of power that led to much bloodshed and destruction. However we see it, the point for today is to recognize that Paul wasn't talking about forming religious armies to conquer whoever gets in our way. Our battle isn't against "blood and flesh" as Paul writes. We are in a spiritual conflict and because we belong to Christ we stand firm in the way of Jesus. The armor and shield of God isn't for going to war but to stay strong in what Jesus makes possible in us. And so, Paul isn't preparing us to fight. Paul is preparing us to be faithful. We belong to Christ so that the way of Jesus is our way. This is why Paul says when considering the armor we put on don't forget about our shoes. When it comes to our shoes, the apostle says, wear "whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." (Eph 6:15)

My grandfather worked 40 years for the Dickerson Shoe Company. My grandfather shared a bit of wisdom with my dad that got passed on to me and it goes like this, "Always be aware of your shoes," My grandfather believed we should keep our shoes in good order. It was important to him that shoes are polished regularly. How you keep your shoes says a lot about how you keep your life. This thought came home to me in another way through a story I read about a man whose son has autism. The man tells that because of autism his young son doesn't speak, so their communication with him is mostly non-verbal. The dad tells that every morning his son looks at the shoes he is wearing. His son looks down and touches the shoes because to find out what is coming that day. Dress shoes mean work. But slip-ons or sneakers mean there's something fun coming. His son loves the shoes that promise something more casual and relaxed is coming that day. For his son, whatever in on his father's feet speaks volumes. We belong to Christ and the message from the bible today is that our shoes "make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace."

I'm thinking, again, about our world. There's a lot of conflict out there. It's in the political landscape to be sure but it's other places, too. There's the warring between nations and the battling that happens whenever one side fights to win and the other side fights not to lose. Where are we as Christians in all of this? What should we be thinking about as we live through the days of this coming week? Paul would have us look down to consider our shoes. Paul would say that before we choose up sides, before we speak our mind, before we claim our ground or stake our position look down to be sure that what is on our feet will make us ready to proclaim peace.

God wraps us in everything we need to stay firm in the faith and to insure we are ambassadors for the way of Jesus in the world. I thank my grandfather for his wisdom and all of us can give thanks to Paul for his teaching today. What's on our feet determines what's in our hearts. It's our shoes that keep us strong as those who this day and always belong to Christ.