

Pastor's Message – 8/29/2021
In Love Worship Series
Move in Love
Ephesians 6:10-18

Violence and hostility and antagonism seem to be the ethos of our time. We hear about it all the time, so much so that it drowns out the good things that, I believe, far outweigh and outnumber the evil in our time. The violence that we hear about is not just physical, but also emotional and spiritual.

Violence, unfortunately, simply appears to be the nature of things. It is what works. It is inevitable; the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts. It is embraced equally by people on the left and on the right; by religious liberals as well as religious conservatives, and by church folk as well as those who label themselves “nones.” The threat of violence, it is believed, is alone able to deter aggressors. “We gotta be the biggest and the best and protect what we have against the threat of the “other.””

Violence, and not Christianity, seems to be the real religion of America. It is a myth in American popular culture, civil religion, nationalism, and foreign policy, that it is violence and power, that will protect us and eventually save us. This is not new. Not new and so, Paul's Letter to the Ephesians is as relevant to us now as it was to the people of the region of Ephesus 2,000 years ago.

All throughout August, we have heard Paul write to us week by week. Starting with the early chapters, Paul makes the claim that the church is a whole new creation, unlike anything people have known before. The old divisions are over by God's power, not human will. Jews and Gentiles equally belong to God. Divided as they are in the world outside the church, now they are part of a new creation. Because this is so new, the writer continues with instructions about how to live together in community. Now the writer winds up the book by offering final advice about how to live in a hostile world. This is timely advice for us too. The hostile world is very present.

Throughout our readings from Paul's letter to the Ephesians this month, there are concrete actions that Paul suggests, and they all have their foundation in the love of God. In the first week, Paul stresses the need for unity—not that all will be the same, but that all people have different

gifts that complement each other and can be used in building up the entire body in love.

On the second Sunday, we were called to a very difficult task: “Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph. 5:1-2, NRSV). I asked the question that Sunday, “What does it mean to imitate God?” Earlier in this passage, Paul gives a helpful list of actions to consider. Sunday three, last week Sunday, encourages a return of love from the people to God by giving thanks and being filled with the Spirit.

Lastly, the well-known passage for today, relates to the “whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:11, NRSV). It even has its groundings in love. Notice all the parts of the armor are not intended for violence, but in living out the love of God—in truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the Spirit. We tend to focus upon the warlike images in this last passage, but the things they represent obviously point toward the love of God. In addition, the image of “standing firm” doesn’t necessarily mean “standing still.” This is an act of preparation, of getting up and getting ready. To do what? Well, that is in the hands of the church.

Ephesians chapter 6 has never been a favorite biblical text for many preachers. Mixing strident military metaphors with talk about the Prince of Peace is not a comfortable place to be in. Preachers will sometimes point out that all the armament listed by the author of the text is mainly defensive armor needed for survival rather than attack.

In spite of that, to the world of the early church and to our current church, the writer has two messages. First, don't give up. "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power." The violence of the world is beyond our power to solve, but there is power beyond ours at work too. Second, there is enough violence in the world already. We don't need to share in it -- our work is to stand firm, to work hard to withstand the forces of evil. Our tools are the shield of faith... and the helmet of salvation. When we've strapped all of that on, just when we're expecting a call to war, the letter turns us back to our main task. We've put on all the equipment we can muster, and then the next instruction is "Pray." Pray? Not slash and cut down, do battle and vanquish? Nope. Pray. Lest we forget, the writer says it three times, four if you include "stay alert and keep praying."

Surely then we'll be instructed to fight, it seems; but the main advice seems to be “defend” and “stand firm.” Our spiritual warfare is to stand

for peace, to proclaim "the gospel of peace" against a warlike and belligerent world. We stand and make sure that we are not becoming warlike ourselves. We stand and cultivate peace within, taming our own raging impulses; so that our brand of peace might be contagious. It's hard to proclaim what we haven't nurtured in ourselves. And, by grace, when we stand, we hold a space for God to work.

First, while one could argue that the word of God is described in terms of an offensive weapon, a sword, it is important to remember that we have already been reminded that Christ, the one, true Word of God, is love. We must also speak the truth in love, and for any who claims to "know" the only true path: the love of Christ surpasses knowledge (3:19).

Second, even standing firm implies engagement—listening, considering, discussing, debating—rather than stubbornness, which is rigid and not other-oriented. Much of what passes in our culture for discussion or debate under the guise of "communicating" is grounded in an unbending, stiff stubbornness and, in fact, embodies the very characteristics we are instructed to put away: bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, and malice (4:31). Standing in the full stature of Christ (4:13), however, is marked by peace, gentleness, reconciliation, tolerance, and respectful communication and requires of us that we be prepared to walk and move in love.

"Standing firm is hard work." I'm sure you've heard trees groan and shriek as they stand against strong winds. Sometimes they are even blown over. Who among us can stand on conviction when the tide of popularity turns against us and strong winds of criticism blow? Is this all about lone individuals standing rigidly and resolute? No. Paul is talking about Christian identity and the roots of our common faith. In order to stand firm, we have to be nurtured in a tradition, grounded in a faithful community, and grow deep in its rich soil." Our ability to pray and to stand firm is not an individual task, but the work of a community, holding each other up. Girded and guarded this way, we can take up the job of proclaiming the gospel of peace.

"Put on all the armor that God gives," (vs. 11) Paul writes. And then he says it again, "Put on all the armor that God gives," (vs. 13). For a Roman soldier, and this is where these images come from, "putting on the whole armor" meant more than just strapping on his own kit. It meant being part of a unit and counting on the comrades on his right and left.

While a Roman soldier's individual armor and weaponry of sword and spear might protect him in a one-on-one fight, it was designed to be most effective when employed in the context of the whole legion. The Celtic and Germanic tribes who faced the Romans on the frontier would have been awed at the sight of a nearly impenetrable phalanx or wall of shields bristling with spears facing them across the battlefield. If the Romans maintained that formation, they were nearly impossible to defeat, but if the ranks could be broken and the legion separated, the fight would be more, even as the vulnerability of individual soldiers would be exposed.

Ephesians 6 is often preached as instruction for an individual, but I want to encourage you to think more about your community of faith. What issues and temptations are attacking your particular community and church? Paul offers advice to help you be better equipped to meet those threats. There are opportunities within and outside the church to "proclaim the gospel of peace."

The sword is the only weapon in Paul's list of arsenals that can be considered an offensive weapon. So, in Paul's thinking, the only way we can get offensive is with Scripture or the Word of God, the good news. There are lots of "offensive" Christians out there; but the offense we're to employ is one that hits people not with condemnation and judgment, but with the good news.

After we have put on all the armor that God gives, after we have brandished the sword of God's good news, prayer is singled out as the way to "put on all the armor that God gives." Prayer is the means by which the church is able to be strong in "the mighty strength of the LORD." Trust not in weapons and swords, but in the everlasting presence of God. The whole Letter has led up to this instruction. A Christian, a church that is not in the Holy Spirit, will not stand and none of the armor will do any good.

Paul has called us to build up each other in love, to live in love, to give thanks in love; but a church not grounded in prayer will not be able to access the power of the Holy Spirit. Prayer is the way to withstand the violence that is around our church and within our church. God gives superpowers, or rather supernatural powers to every believer. So, if the evil day is not yet here, it will surely come; and, with all the armor that God gives, "when the battle is over, you will still be standing firm."