

Geared Up for Life

You might think that a seven-week series in the middle of summer is a recipe for disaster. Even without the remnants of a pandemic and everyone still scrambling to come up with some sort of hybrid virtual and in-person worship experience, a series this long in a time when, at least in the US, many folks are thinking about vacation and church attendance is difficult to sustain. Yet here we are!

Well, we chose to proceed with this long series because the lectionary invited us to take a walk through the Epistle to the Ephesians, and it was too good an offer to resist. Ephesians has been called “the Queen of the Epistles” by no less an august personage as Dr. William Barclay. (*Wm Barclay, **The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians**, Daily Study Bible Series, Westminster, 1976, p.61.*) And he admits that he got it from others. Why so much enthusiasm for a letter? There are simply too many things to go into in this space, but perhaps the simplest response is that the letter contains everything you need to explain the faith in one compact package.

Ephesians divides neatly into two halves, both of which are covered in this series. The first half, chapters 1-3, provides a theological foundation for the faith in some of the most beautiful language in the Epistles. The second half, chapters 4-6, focuses on the ethical dimensions of the faith: How do we live it out? This second half reminds us that faith isn’t simply about believing, but about living.

There is some considerable debate about the letter. Many, if not most, scholars argue that it wasn’t written by Paul, for example. It also seems clear that it wasn’t really written to a specific church in Ephesus, despite the title, but was a circular letter designed to be passed from church to church and community to community. There are none of the personal touches in this letter, addressing local issues and individuals, which, for some, means that it comes across more as a sermon than correspondence.

All the more reason to allow Ephesians to be our guide through these summer weeks as we seek to live out our faith, making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We can find real, on-the-ground help for that mission in these texts. As always, when we design a series, we ask that you shape

it in your way for your context. There are a couple of ways that you could adapt this series. First, and simplest: each week can stand on its own. Yes, there is a connection of themes and suggestions, but accepting attendance patterns as they are, each week can be another tool in the box that helps build the life of faith we are seeking.

Another possibility is to create two shorter series within the longer one. You could emphasize the distinction in the two parts of Ephesians. Part one could highlight the last word of the theme: Gearing Up for **LIFE**. It would cover the first three chapters of Ephesians and the theological foundations of our faith. This would be the “why” part of the Epistle. Why do we embrace this life of faith? Why have we been given this blessing, this opportunity, this grace? It can introduce the core themes of our faith. This would be weeks one, two, and three of the series. The second miniseries within the series would consist of weeks four through seven and would focus on the first part of the theme, **GEARING UP** for Life. This is the “how” part of the letter. Because of the grace we examined in the first half of the letter, this “how-to” section is a call to living a theologically ethical life.

You may find other ways to use the materials we provide. Feel free to explore and create, to make something uniquely yours to fit your context. Or simply trust in the text itself to walk you through this important series to revitalize your understanding and acting, your theology, and your ethics as you seek to be the church alive in a complicated world. So, join with us as we work to be geared up for life this summer!

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Setting Our Hope

July 11, 2021 – [Ephesians 1:3-14](#)

Color: Green

INTRODUCTION

It's midsummer, and it may be hard to maintain focus. So what can we do to bring folks back to what worship can be or needs to be for the body of Christ? Throw a party! Sure, last week was the holiday, but now we're ready to get back on the discipleship path and grow in our faith, even as we seek to reach out to the wider community around us. So, a celebration mood seems appropriate to get folks in gear. And this series, which might sound like a hard disciplined drive to be more Christian, as the song says, is actually a perfect opportunity to give thanks for the blessings that we have in the faith.

The God who has blessed us in every way – that's what we're celebrating; that's what we are testifying to. So, how do we celebrate such a gift? By telling our story and our stories. Who can help the whole congregation celebrate being blessed? Who can tell their stories in a way that lifts everyone up? Maybe it is the story of beginning when you first said yes to Jesus. Maybe it is a recent blessing, something that reminded you that you were precious in God's sight. Share those stories, so that all have an opportunity to reflect on how blessed they are. But these aren't exclusive blessings. Rather, we are reminded that we are blessed to be a blessing. How is your congregation reaching out to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the community around you? Whose life has been affected by the church in tangible ways? Tell those stories during worship, so that everyone can celebrate and feel a part of the ripples of blessing.

Certainly, the letter to the Ephesians is about gearing up, about making sure that our faith is not just an internal thing, not just a head thing. It is about living out the faith. But living out our faith can begin with a simple celebration. It is good to be blessed. It is good to be adopted, to belong. It is good to remind ourselves that we are not alone, but a part of something bigger than ourselves.

PREACHING NOTES

Let's say you accepted the lectionary challenge and have chosen to tackle the Epistle to the Ephesians over the course of the summer. Let's say you are hesitant because you know that the minds of your hearers might be on things other than dealing with a theologically dense text that attempts to wrestle with some foundational truths about our faith. But let's say you have chosen to dig down deep into this letter to find the streams of living water that will bring refreshment and revitalization to a world weary, travel hesitant, hope-starved people. Because that is indeed what is offered. That is what this "queen of the Epistles" has in store. Set aside the concern over whether you can sustain such a long series with each text building on the previous and ending with some kind of coherent whole. Just let each one stand on its own, if need be, like drops of refreshment from a single source. Each sip will be good in and of itself, and if we get a glimpse of the larger whole, then so much the better; but if we don't, we can just dwell in each moment as complete in and of itself.

So, where do we start when preaching from a letter like Ephesians? Do we spend time explaining that this letter is different from others? Do we reveal that even the name of the church addressed doesn't appear in all the manuscripts and that some wonder if maybe this was designed to be a circular letter, passed from hand to hand, congregation to congregation? Shall we discuss that there is some considerable question about the authorship of this letter, that it does sound like Paul's thought, even while it uses language and grammar that is unique to this writing? Do we talk about the fact that this letter is the least personal of all the letters, in some ways, that there aren't the glimpses into church life that enliven so much of the New Testament writing, which forces us even more to look at the words themselves and not attempt to get a glimpse behind the curtain at what caused this Epistle to be written? Where do we start?

Start wherever makes sense to you. You were expecting a waffling kind of response, weren't you? The question is, "How much information do you feel is necessary to get people to take a deep look at this letter?" What kind of groundwork do you need to lay to convince the hearers that they too need to engage more fully in these words, in this study? Because that is what it needs to be, a study—an examination of the truth that is offered here, not as surface, cliché-ridden, easy-answer simplicities; but as a deep grounding into the nature of

what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and a desire to help others find their way into this relationship.

So, yes, maybe some of this needs to be shared in the sermon to keep people on the edge of their seats, to keep their summer brains engaged. Or maybe there is space for a pre-sermon text study or post-sermon talk-back session that allows more of this to be revealed. Let's be honest with the questions. Let's invite the congregation to engage in serious study and to learn to think for themselves. Because it is only when we can engage our critical faculties that we become effective witnesses in the process of disciple making.

Once you've determined the place of the background information, we come back to the question, "Where do we start?" Start where the text starts – with good news. Just look at the opening verses from our text:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ ... (*Eph. 1:3-5, NRSV*).

You are blessed! You are chosen! You are part of the family! What a declaration to offer thirsty people in a desert world of failure and exclusion and neglect. Consider what it would mean for a young person struggling with feelings of self-worth or an older person feeling neglected and abandoned by family. Please start with good news.

Of course, if it is amazing to hear such a proclamation, think of the joy it would be—and is—to be able to proclaim such a word. As the text unfolds in this opening thesis statement of the letter, it becomes revealed that this good news is not to be contained within the walls of the community of faith. The hope and the will of God, the beloved, is that the whole world will be gathered up into the blessing that is covenant with God into the beloved community. And our job, it appears from these verses, is not to draw lines of exclusion, but to open wide the arms of graced-filled faith and to welcome, to bless, to adopt into our family all the sons and daughters of God. This is the "purpose of him who accomplishes all things" and therefore our purpose as well. We who have been adopted are now the adopters. We who have been blessed are now the ones who bless. We who

have been included are now the includers. The circle enlarges; the ripples work out to bring transformation to a world sorely in need of the influence of the kingdom.

The text ends with a promise of sustenance, a reminder that we aren't on our own as we navigate this faith journey, the discipleship path. We are "marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit," writes the author of this letter – but not promised as in, "One day you'll get this, if you are good and eat all your vegetables." No, we are promised, as in, "You have it; that presence is there; you can count on it; you can lean into it; you can trust that you are not alone as you seek to live out and proclaim the good news of adoption and blessing." As a sign of that presence, there is a community that surrounds you – a community that is a part of you. As the letter continues to unfold, we discover that the purpose of this blessing and this inclusion is to bring unity and to offer praise to God. The praise is evident here, clearly, but the unity is yet to come. And yet it is woven through this text in the consistent use of the second person plural. You all are blessed; we are adopted; all y'all give praise to God. To individualize the faith is to misuse the essence of what is offered here: presence, community, relationship. Yes, of course, the individual matters; yes, each is called and valued and lifted up. But the true impact of the faith is when we participate in the life of the community, when we offer to God even our relationships as the means of witness and praise, as we engage with a hurting world with the balm of blessing and bring healing and wholeness and peace.

The author (or for shorthand's sake, we might say *Paul*) says all this is the result of the choice we made of setting our hope on Christ. This hope is not a thin wish with fingers crossed that we make with our eyes mostly closed. Instead, it is the purpose behind our living. It is the driving force that moves us out of despair into joy, out of self into relationship, out of the church walls into the world to live that hope out loud. We set our hope on Christ; now let us live that hope each day.

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – He Is Our Peace

July 18, 2021 – [Ephesians 2:11-22](#)

Color: Green

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be the dwelling place or a dwelling place for God? How can we present the church and/or the community of faith of something worthy of that designation? In this second chapter of Ephesians, this is the description that we are given of the church: the dwelling place of God. God takes up residence among us. What does it mean to be God's home?

Certainly, at the core of it, according to Ephesians 2:11-22, is the idea of peace. We are the dwelling place of God because we have broken down the walls that divide people. We have stressed inclusion; we have focused on hospitality. Who has a place among us? Who is left out? What can we do, as a worshiping congregation to show our willingness to include, to invite, to make welcome those whom society has no room for, those who don't seem to matter? And if we aren't sure who these are, then maybe our prayers ought to include eyes to see as Jesus sees. Maybe we ought to pray for the wisdom to see whom we are excluding, even if inadvertently. What kind of access do we provide to our facility? How do we make room for those who are not like us in some ways and yet very much like us in the ways that matter?

To claim Christ as our peace doesn't just mean we just get along with those on the inside; it also means we reach out to find community with those outside our walls. We stand in solidarity with those who are abused, those who are suffering, and those who are neglected. We also stand against racism and the injustice of prejudice and hate. Recognizing that we are a dwelling place for God means that we take up the causes that God, through the prophets, has stressed through the centuries.

What walls are you going to take down? What divisions do you seek to pray against, calling upon the power of the indwelling God to strengthen you for the task of dismantling the systems and structures that oppress God's people? Maybe this act of worship is a call to discernment, an invitation for God to give God's

guidance in how the church will move out into the world as disciples of Jesus Christ ready to bring transformation.

We are called to be peacemakers, which isn't about sitting back and feeling good about ourselves. It is about walking where Christ walked in and among the people.

PREACHING NOTES

I came in like a wrecking ball / I never hit so hard in love / All I wanted was to break your walls / All you ever did was wreck me

*"Wrecking Ball" from the album Bangerz · Copyright:
Writer(s): Maureen Mcdonald, Lukasz Gottwald, Stephan Moccio,
Henry Walter, Sacha Skarbek, 2013*

"Wrecking Ball" could have been written by St. Paul (or whoever wrote the Epistle to the Ephesians). Admittedly it is hard to picture that author swinging in seated on a giant wrecking ball, wearing what the author came into the world with; nor can we imagine twerking in the acropolis, but the idea in this chorus sounds hauntingly like the words written in the Epistle text for this weekend. At least, there seems to be a central point. Don't believe me? Don't believe that Miley Cyrus could stumble across some scripture truth? Well, me neither. But here it is.

So many things jump out at us in these verses. But running through it all like a . . . well, like a wrecking ball is the image of the wall. There is division in this passage, separation. There is us and them; there is then and now; there is the in and the out, the strangers and the citizens, the aliens and the members of the household. It makes you wonder what a word like *peace* is doing in such a setting. It makes you wonder if peace is even possible when there is so much division. It would take a monumental effort to overcome those divisions and tear down those walls. It would take something that seems beyond us.

A set up? Well, maybe. But we have come to accept Jesus as the answer to so much that we've forgotten what the questions are. We have come to see the easy solution to problems that we've forgotten just how pervasive and how immense

those problems really are. We think walking with Jesus is a stroll in the park when, in fact, it is a long, hard climb up an insurmountable peak.

He is our peace. We love that idea. We lean into that comfort, that joy. We beg for a little bit of peace. Jesus is the comforter who pats us on the head in the quiet moments of our lives before sending us out to survive in the moral fray that surrounds us. If we can just hold on, we think, if we can just stay clean and undaunted by the struggles all around us, then we can retreat back into the loving arms of Jesus, who will love us back into health, who will wipe away our tears and bind up our wounds.

It is a wonderful thought, and it is often what sustains us. It is often just what we need: the Jesus who soothes and comforts; the Jesus who tells us that all will be well; the Jesus who cleans up the messes we have made with our lives. With this Jesus at our side, then we can sing “Bring on your wrecking ball!” We know that hard times will come; we know that hopes and dreams will be dashed; we know that all our youth and beauty will be given to the dust. But we also know that this isn’t the whole story. We know that there is more; there is eternity; there is something beyond the horizon, and no matter how many hard times come, there is always God’s time, God’s reign, God’s kingdom still to come. And Christ will welcome us home. We can hold on knowing that. Jesus will welcome us home.

That is the real Jesus. Trust me on this. The real Jesus, but not all of Jesus. When the author writes, “He is our peace,” he doesn’t have in mind the quiet, gentle, comforting Jesus who just wants to give us some time to ourselves. No, the writer has something bigger in mind, something louder, more transformative. He’s been listening to Miley, I’m afraid. *I came in like a wrecking ball / I never hit so hard in love / All I wanted was to break your walls / All you ever did was wreck me.*

This wrecking ball Jesus is about knocking down walls, the walls that divide us, the walls of hostility. In love, he hit so hard that all the things that keep us separate, all the measures we use to rise above another, to be better than, to be more important than, have all been knocked down – not just knocked down but reduced to rubble. Destroyed. Eliminated.

It wasn’t an easy battle. It took blood; it took death; it took all that he had to pour out for us. But he did it. He came in like a wrecking ball and got wrecked in the process. But the walls came down. Because of that love, the walls came down.

But here's the funny thing. Well, maybe not so funny. Maybe tragic would be a better word to use. Here's the tragic thing, the terrible thing; here is the horrible reality: We still think we are living behind those walls. We still think we are defined by those walls. We still think we are to keep to ourselves, to keep to our own kind, as herded behind those walls.

The walls are down, but we still live as though they were not. We still live as though there are still strangers and aliens, as though there are those in and those out; as though there are those near and those far. And the result of living that way is that sometimes we are the outs; we are far away; we are strangers and aliens. As long as we believe there are such divisions, we will continually find ourselves on the wrong side. We build the walls that Christ destroyed and find ourselves not protected but imprisoned, not released to a better life but cowering behind the very divisions we reestablish.

He is our peace. He is what binds us together into one body, into one family. This peace is not an inner peace to keep us sane in an insane world. This is a wrecking ball of peace that knocks down the insane divisions, the madness of superiority, and binds us together with those who are just like us, surprisingly just like us. Those we thought were so different are reflections of the same God that we try to bear in our hands and hearts and words and deeds are really brothers and sisters. We sit at table with them in defiance of a world that wants to build more walls. And when we encounter those divisive construction projects, then we, like him, come in like a wrecking ball. We strike hard in love. We tear down those walls, even if we get wrecked in the process. Even if. Because if we don't, if we let those walls stay up, then we will never know peace. We will never know him as we long to do and as we need to do. Because he is our peace.

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – Rooted and Grounded in Love

July 25, 2021 – [Ephesians 3:14-21](#)

Color: Green

INTRODUCTION

This is the end of the first part of the letter to the Ephesians. As stated in the general introduction, the letter divides into theological understandings in chapters 1-3 and ethical application in chapters 4-6. So, we conclude the first section with what has come to be called the prayer for the church. It isn't a prayer necessarily, as it is not addressed to God, but to the hearers in the church. "I pray that you may be strengthened," writes the author of the letter. "You" being the church, or us. *Paul* is praying that we might come to understand something of what is going on here. He prays that we might know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge! So how do you know the unknowable?

The only way we can know something as deep and as profound as the love of God that we experience through the grace of Christ is through the witness of the church. How do you understand any one's love? By living it, by sharing it, by talking about it. By giving God thanks for it. Our prayers and our songs should be full of the experience of being loved into wholeness, being "rooted and grounded" in love, so that we can begin to see that all our actions, all our doing in the world is motivated or in response to the love that defines us.

The preaching notes share the concept of "Gotcha Day," where families who adopt celebrate the day when they became a family with the new adoptee. Perhaps there are families within your congregation who have adopted children and have the tradition of celebrating "gotcha day." If so, you could invite them to tell their story and how that has become a day of honoring the family that they have become. It is often not just a celebration of the one who was adopted, but of the whole family that was made or transformed by the claiming of this new member. It becomes a tangible way of experiencing what it means to be brought into the family of God.

It could also be a time of celebrating your membership in the church, the family that you have become as you acknowledge each person, each participant in the

life of the church. We are who we are because of each and because of all. Without you, we are incomplete. And it can also be a reminder that there are those who are not yet part of the family, and the congregation still has space to grow.

We are reminded by this prayer for the church that God is glorified through the community. God is revealed through our lives together and our invitation to the wider world. We represent the God we worship by how we live in community. “To God be glory in the church” writes the author of Ephesians, one of the few places where church appears in the New Testament. Let our church be a witness to the love of God in us and among us.

PREACHING NOTES

It’s a little over a week to an auspicious day on our personal family calendar. It was on August 5, 1994, after an anxious nine-month wait (yeah, funny isn’t it?), that my wife and I drove to Chicago O’Hare Airport to pick up an orphan named Kim Myung Hoon, a nine-month-old with bright eyes and a ready smile, and as if by magic turned him into our son Rhys, who is now a young adult and somewhat embarrassed to be the center of such attention. Gotcha Day. Every August 5, it’s Gotcha Day. It’s not a birthday, but then sort of; it’s a rebirth day, a day of becoming a family. That little life from halfway around the planet changed our lives in an instant. He filled a gap we didn’t even know we had. That moment turned us upside down or right side up with a simple smile and a reach from the hands that held him on that long flight from South Korea to our hands. To our hearts.

An odd moment in the process was when we met with the judge to formalize the adoption. The legalese was stunning, to say the least. One phrase stood out in my mind over all the others. Whereas—it’s always whereas for the legal profession—“whereas over time they learned to love him” . . . I almost said, excuse me, but no. No there was no over time thing here. It was an instant. In the terminal at O’Hare Airport, standing at the gate (yes, you used to be able to go clear to the gate in those days, watch the plane land, wait anxiously for all the passengers to disembark and then set eyes on the child who will be, who was your child), in an

instant he was mine. He was ours; we were his. Family. Just like that. We didn't need to learn to love. We needed to learn to live with him, and we're still doing that frankly, because he changes all the time. We needed to learn how to express that love and how to respond to that love. But the love itself was a gift, a moment of grace that came from somewhere, someone else.

"For this reason," Paul writes. Okay, one little aside here, I'll say it again – there is some considerable debate about whether this letter was written by Paul or not. We do know that not all the texts in the New Testament that carry Paul's name were actually written by Paul. We know that plagiarism as a concept didn't exist at the time of the writing of the documents of the Bible. We also know that it was a common practice to attribute a letter or a sermon to someone famous in order to get more people to read it. No one would have considered that odd in those days. So, one of the questions that biblical scholarship needs to help answer for us is whether the documents we have were actually written by the people whose names are on them. It is important for us to know from a historical point of view. It is good to know how the Bible came to be as we have it. It is important for us to understand that the words that we value so much came about through a community process, that the Spirit inspired a wide range of folks over a long period of time. We need to understand that the words we read are a part of a lived experience, not some abstract truth that we were handed from above. The historical critical process is one of the tools the church can use to examine our foundational documents. So, you need to know, and I need to be honest enough to admit, that there is some debate as to whether Paul wrote these words or not. And to be honest, I'm not sure.

On the other hand, I'm not sure it matters all that much. If we view the Bible as a community project anyway, then who actually put pen to paper (or some ancient world equivalent) doesn't really matter. I have no doubt that if Paul didn't write this letter, then he certainly influenced it. Those are his words and his thoughts that appear throughout these verses. I am happy to use the shorthand and talk about what Paul said.

"For this reason," Paul writes. What's the reason? Well, he spends the first part of the letter explaining the reason. It is because of the immeasurable grace of God. Because in that grace, all are welcome; all are included. All. And for Paul, all

means all. Some of the rest of them had to struggle with all. Surely not gentiles, they said; surely not pagans, surely not enemies, surely not those whose lives are just way too different from ours, who don't speak our language, who don't dress like we do, think like we do, work like we do. Not all, surely. No, says Paul, all means all. And for this reason, I fall to my knees in awe of God.

And, he says, I pray. For more. More of this grace freely offered. More of the love that staggers the imagination. Give us more. Give us strength. That's first on his list. Strength in the inner being. Strong hearts, strong souls. He wants us strong at the core of our being. Knowing that we are subject to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, he wants us strong where it counts. We pray for bad things to go away or not come to us. Paul prays that we have the strength to stand when the bad things come. He prays that we might have power.

That power comes from the Spirit. It comes from the Christ who dwells in us. Because we are in process. As you are being rooted and grounded in love. We receive the capacity to love by grace. It is a gift. Boom. Instant. Like a new life awaiting you in an airport terminal. But it takes time to learn to live that life of love. It takes effort. It takes moving forward and falling back. It takes success and failure to learn to live a life of love. We have to rock the vehicle, back and forth in order to break free of the rut we find ourselves in from time to time. We are being rooted and grounded in love. Being rooted. We're not done. As soon as we think we are done, as soon as we think we've got it, we've lost it. Hold on to the Christ who dwells within.

So, we can know. That's why we contemplate Christ. That's why we study his life, listen to his words, weep at his example, rejoice at his blessing – so that we can know. Know what? Know what is unknowable. Know what is beyond knowing. The breadth and width and height and depth. Um . . . of what? Of him. Of his love. Paul wants us to know that which surpasses knowledge. If your head isn't spinning yet, then go back and read it again. Paul prays that we are to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. And this knowing of the unknowable, or maybe better, this knowing that we didn't come to on our own but that was given to us like a child in an airport allows us to be filled up.

That's what happened that first Gotcha Day all those years ago. I was filled up. We were filled up with love and joy and happiness, but also with concerns and

worries and needs to be met. We were filled with that which keeps us going, which pushes us to go further, to go deeper. It's a commitment, certainly. A new way of living, of being, of loving. Paul calls it being filled with all the fullness of God – blessing and possibility and suffering and hurt too. God doesn't call us to an easy life, but a full life, a deep life – a life that struggles with how to love but driven by the certainty that loving is a better way to live. Even if we don't always know how, it is going to work out.

But that's okay. Not knowing is okay. Because there is one who knows. And our vision is limited, so we'll trust in the one who sees more and can work what seem like miracles every day – far more than all we ask or imagine, because we don't know how to ask or imagine. We'll just love. Together. That's the other important secret of this passage. All the yous are plural. We do this better together, this learning to love thing, this living in hope thing, this being filled with all the fullness thing. We do it, we know it, we experience it better together. All y'all. Us all. Now that's worthy of a doxology, right, Paul? "Now to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." Amen.

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – A Life Worthy

August 1, 2021 – [Ephesians 4:1-16](#)

Color: Green

INTRODUCTION

Now we're moving from preaching to meddling, as the old cliché goes. To declare that there is a life worthy of the gospel is to claim that there is a life that isn't. There are choices to be made in how we live out our faith. And some of those choices reveal whether we are indeed "rooted and grounded in love" or not.

A read through the text for this week shows us that a primary sign of the gospel-worthy life is unity. This isn't so much an individual check list of dos and don'ts, but a plumbline by which we measure the health of the whole body. We retain our individuality, of course, as a variety of gifts are needed. But it is the unity of the body that reveals the gospel at work in and among us. "See how those Christians love one another."

So how can we celebrate the unity of the body as we worship this week? What shared mission efforts can you lift up? What corporate decisions can you celebrate? What shared moments of fellowship or support have there been? What relationship healing experiences brought the body closer together? What risks have been taken in confidence because of the deep trust in one another?

"We Are One in the Spirit" might be a theme song for this week. Prayers might be for a sense of belonging together, even as we stay open to others seeking a fellowship to join.

Of course, the oneness of the body is not just when the church gathers together in the building. What signs of belonging together, of supporting one another can you identify that take place beyond the walls? What invitations can be issued that allow the church to be in support—prayer support, financial support, physical support—of members of the body as they seek to live out their call in the world? How can you be "one in the Spirit"?

This text also has a list of various roles in the life of the church. Maybe this is time—yes, even in the summer—to have a ministry fair. Help each person find a

place in the body as you strive for unity and growth. Remember, it is the whole community of faith that is called to live a life worthy.

PREACHING NOTES

The fourth chapter is the beginning of what appears to be a powerful sermon on living as a Christian in a difficult, even hostile world. Some of the writing here is poetry that tugs at the deepest longings of our hearts. Some of it sounds like a father pleading with his wayward children to come home again. Some of it provides glimpses of the kingdom of God, and it seems almost within our reach.

But this exhortation, this sermon is launched with these words:

*I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called. **Ephesians 4:1***

An interesting opening line, don't you think? The author, who called himself Paul in the opening verse, so we'll call him *Paul (in italics)* to acknowledge the dispute. *Paul* begins his exhortation, his plea ("I beg you") with an admission that he is a prisoner. He has surrendered his will to another. He has given over his desire to see his goals accomplished, his name broadcast, his desires met. As a prisoner, he invites us into a new way of living. As a captive, he wants to show us how to be free.

Plus, he reminds us that this life is not an achievement on our parts. This is not a goal we reach or a level we surpass. This is a gift. Salvation, new life, new freedom, forgiveness is a gift. Our job is to realize the gift and live it. Live, he says, as though you were loved because you are. Live as though you were forgiven because you have been. Live as though you are more valuable than you can imagine because you have been given a gift beyond price. "Lead a life worthy of the calling."

That's how *Paul* starts part two of the Epistle, the exhortation part. Remember? Part one tells us everything we do is a response. This call to live in certain ways works only if we understand that we aren't doing it to receive the grace that comes from God. It becomes possible only if we understand that we aren't doing it to earn God's love, Christ's sacrifice, the gift called salvation. It has to be this

way. All that we do as Christians, as followers, comes only after we are set free to love.

That is the second thing the author tells us, which might sound a lot like the first thing he tells us: the ability to live the life to which we are called comes from Christ and not from us. Our natural state is one of limitation, one of captivity to our self-centered view of the world and our place in it. But now we are free to be all that Christ calls us to be. We are free to be humble and gentle and patient and loving; we are free to live in peace because the captivity of our nature has been made captive in Christ. Therefore, we can begin to approach leading a life worthy of this capturing, this calling.

What does that life look like? 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. That's what such a life encompasses. Now there is too much here to deal with all at once. But let me point out just two simple dimensions of this description of a way of living.

First, the purpose of patience—and all the other dimensions mentioned in these verses—is not to help us with our blood pressure problems. That is a by-product, and a positive one, ask any cardiologist. And in our culture, that “what’s in it for me” question is always in the forefront. But *Paul* doesn’t present this formula as a way to deal with your inner demons. Patience, as with any gift of the Spirit, is to build up the body. We exercise our patience when we live and interact with others. Inherent in this description is the understanding that dealing with people is not an easy thing to do! So, *Paul* is preparing us by making sure we are equipped to handle community. We need patience; but we need a patient love that enables us to bear with one another. We need that outward focus to make this work.

Patience, for a Christian, is relational.

Second, the goal of patience is unity. Our faith is unity, argues *Paul*: One Lord, one faith, one baptism . . . Our Christian living, then, is not a way to measure up, but a way to build community. We are patient with one another, not simply to tolerate others, but to love them.

The paradox here is that it is love that begets patience. And we learn to love those difficult to love by practicing patience. So, if love is indeed a good, I guess it is true that good things come to those who wait . . . with patience.

And some wait as apostles and some wait as prophets and some wait . . . Wait, of course, doesn't mean sit on our hands. Wait, in this context, means work. "The gifts he gave," it says. What a gift it is to be sent out into the world to be a sign that God is still at work – apostles. What a gift to be sent out as ones who tell the truth to a world that loves comfortable lies – prophets. What a gift to be the one who can find and proclaim good news even when everyone else sees negativity – evangelists. What a gift to be those who provide care for others, for the hurting and the broken – pastors. What a gift to be those who bring knowledge, who lift up those who don't understand this world and their place in it – teachers. What a gift to build up the body!

While we wait with patience. Why *patience* in the midst of all this effort? Patience seems to mean sitting back and waiting. Well, not for *Paul*. Patience is claiming the larger vision and the longer hope, even as we work like mad in the here and now. It is trusting that by God's Spirit we are not far from the Kin-dom and that what we do shares this vision and this hope. We trust that the vision is real, that the kin-dom is real. We hold on to that hope by living a life worthy of the gospel. It is a sign of our hope by how we choose to live each and every day of our lives. It is a sign of our hope, our patience in that hope, when we welcome, when we cross the boundaries of hatred and division around us. When we seek to shape the living image of the church into something approaching the kin-dom of God, we are leading a life worthy of the gospel.

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – Speaking Truth

August 8, 2021 – [Ephesians 4:25-5:2](#)

Color: Green

INTRODUCTION

Our text this week places a high calling on the people of God. Two of them in fact. The text ends with the urging to be imitators of God. It is difficult to imagine a higher calling than that. But this is why we spend most of our lives in the process of knowing God. As we worship, we are introduced to the attributes of God. God is . . . We explore these ideas not just so that we can know and worship God better, but so that we can seek these same attributes in ourselves and our community. We might as well admit that we will come closer to imitating God if we do it collectively, if we support one another in the effort to be more loving, more holy, more righteous, because that is how we experience God.

Worship could be full of these attributes of God. We could sing about how we experience the love of God, the grace of God, the comforting presence of God. We could pray for new and deeper experiences of God in our daily lives and in ourselves as we seek to live out our call to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. How we present God in our interactions with people will reveal what we really think of who God is. We can tell stories of knowing God through the care of a parent or the support of a friend. We can testify to the presence of God supporting us as we reached out to help a neighbor or even a stranger in need around us.

We tell these stories or we share testimony as a way of learning about how God acts in and through the lives of others. We do that, not just so that we can rejoice with them in their experience of God, but so that we can learn to recognize God's presence and the Spirit's urging in our own lives. God is always acting in and through the people of God, but we haven't always learned to recognize it. So, when we share those stories, we give language to human experiences of all sorts to help us acknowledge the divine presence in our lives.

But perhaps the most important attribute, at least in the text and in our world today, some would argue, is truth telling. The text begins with a call to be people

of the truth. “Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors . . .” (Eph. 4:25) We often read such a verse and think it must be talking about some deep, profound truth, like Jesus Christ is Lord! And it is that, but not only that. It is truth in general. In a world so caught up in lies and deceit, to be committed to the truth – because we follow one who said of himself “I am the truth” – is to be countercultural in a profound way. We are the ones who choose not to perpetuate lies, who have put away falsehood so that we can claim truth in all our encounters. We are seekers after truth; we don’t pass on opinions because they sound like truth; we seek the truth because God is a God of truth.

In the middle of the text, we have a catalog of behaviors that can shape our interactions with one another and the world. We might be challenged as we gather for worship to make sure that all our dealings with the world are governed by such things as kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness and that we put away wrath and anger and slander. This should be true whether in person or online. How do we measure our encounters with the world? Do we seek to be people of truth? Do we seek to imitate God? Indeed, this second part of the letter to the Ephesians runs the risk of meddling in our lives, because this is more than just what we think; it is also what we do. “Be imitators of God, beloved children.”

PREACHING NOTES

Paul (the italics acknowledge that there is debate about the authorship of this letter but uses the name as an identifier) knows that living together isn’t easy. And the first part of chapter four isn’t implying that we will all be the same, having the same thoughts and inclinations and ways of operating. No, we are still who we are; we still bring the gifts we have been given to the community. And that is great in that it adds to the vast and diverse tapestry that is the human community called the church, but it is also difficult because we bump up against one another and sometimes get upset by different points of view.

So, to both acknowledge this inevitability and to build in systems and procedures that will help us deal with these difficulties, Paul talks to us about how we go about getting along. He reminds us that lying, even when we think it is safer, is a dangerous thing. He reminds us that anger left unchecked causes more damage

than we realize, to us and to those around us. He says there are no shortcuts in the life of the community, just a need for labor and effort on everyone's part. And he says that sniping, pulling down, and tearing one another up is the antithesis of what community is about. We are in the business, he reminds us, of building up. Why do we find tearing down so much fun? All that stuff (wrangling, for example, what the heck is that?) All that stuff gets us off the track of trying to be like Christ, trying to love as he loved, and trying to participate in the community of faith called the church. So, get back to the "ones" in the beginning of this chapter, he says, and remember to what we were called.

What is that calling? Well, chapter 5 declares it in unequivocal terms: be like God. Wow. Let's compound it: love like Christ. Our initial reaction is to recoil, to raise our hands in defeat and declare that this is something beyond the realm of possibility. How in the world can I act like God? How can I love like Christ? Inadequately, incompletely, with lots of fits and starts, that's how. Yet it is our goal to become like Christ. That's the name we have taken – Christian, little Christ. That's the road we are on. But since we are striving to imitate God, then we also imitate God's grace, even with ourselves. Certainly, with everyone else around us, but us too. It doesn't mean, though, that we only pretend, that our effort is only half-hearted. No, our goal, our drive, our vision for ourselves and our community is to be like God in how we deal with one another and the world.

Hold on there for a moment. How did we get from telling the truth to acting like God? They are one in the same. It is where we start. It is how we choose to live in community. And remember, this whole text is about what it means to be the community of faith, not how to be better individuals. That's a problem we western Christians have with these texts. We want to individualize everything. We want to find out how to be the best me I can be. While there is some value in the individual approach for personal growth and a deeper walk in faith, it also misses the essence of the text to over-individualize this call. At its base level, consider the concept of imitating God for a moment. As an individual, to claim that my goal is to act like God has hints of megalomania. But within the bounds of the community, imitating God becomes a check on behavior and a way of lifting up the body as a whole. Imitating God is not, in other words, a reference to who I am in my essence, but a model for how I act with and toward others. As a helpful check on us, the phrase "be imitators of God" in the Greek is second person

plural: "All y'all, be imitators of God." Together, we might have a chance to create the kind of community that behaves toward one another, views one another, values one another, as God does.

At the core of this Christ-like love, this God imitation, is truth telling. That brings us back to where the text begins. Jesus so valued truth that in John's gospel he declares "I am the truth." Truth is a part of the essence of Christ, and therefore, is something we claim in our behaviors toward one another and the world. Putting away falsehood, *Paul* declares we speak truth; we remove ego; we build up rather than tear down. This is who we are. To harbor a lie is to contradict our essential nature. To approve deceit is to deny the heart of loving like Christ. We don't bring the world to Christ via falsehood, but through truth. The truth of our own lives, to be sure, but of the gospel we strive to live as well. Part of our truth is our own failure to imitate God in all that we do, even as we claim that goal. The truth we speak is a truth that we claim as our own, even as we acknowledge that it is bigger than ourselves. It is not contained in me as an individual but governs our relationships within the community and beyond.

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Giving Thanks

August 15, 2021 – [Ephesians 5:15-20](#)

Color: Green

INTRODUCTION

Every fourth week of November, we tell ourselves that Thanksgiving should not just be a once-a-year thing, but a way of living every day. Ephesians 5:15-20 is a call to remember that belief. This brief text sums up with “giving thanks to God the Father at all times.” At all times! What if we held a thanksgiving service here in the middle of August? Turn to the hymns we usually sing in November and be reminded that gratitude isn’t confined to a season. Yes, many of those hymns are harvest related, but the bounty of God’s providence can be seen at all times. And here in August, in many parts of the world, gardens are beginning to produce, and we can be thankful even for the abundance of zucchini!

But remember the “at all times” part of the text. This isn’t just about being thankful for food and plentiful harvests. It is about finding blessings in everyday living. Of course, since the text invites it, there should be plenty of singing in this thanksgiving in August service; “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your hearts.” Gratitude is to be found all over the hymnal and our song repertoire; it is one of the dominant themes of worship music.

One of the purposes of such a worship experience is to move our thinking away from what we think we don’t have toward what we have already been blessed with. It is shifting from a scarcity mindset into a realization of the abundance of God’s providence. But even as we do so, we should take time to acknowledge that there are many who are left out of the abundance, not because of the lack of resources, but due to unequal distribution. That is why we are invited to share what we have, so that all might have something. So, lifting up feeding and helping ministries from a gratitude perspective is an appropriate way to be thankful. At the same time, we can advocate for more just policies in our town or city or nation, as we seek to lift from poverty those who have been left aside.

The Ephesians text talks about the times being evil, and it is often hard to argue about the brokenness of the world around us. But haranguing what we identify as societal ills will not likely lead to an experience of gratitude. Certainly, the kin-dom we proclaim is not yet fully here, which is what the author of Ephesians is warning readers about. Yet we can see glimpses of that reality around us if we begin to pay attention and call out what is right in our world, what is reflective of God's grace and kin-dom living. Even more is the call to be the sign of God's grace in the world, to be the example that living by kin-dom values is not only possible but preferable to the values of a broken world. This is how we give thanks at all times, by living our gratitude each and every day.

PREACHING NOTES

"Be careful then," writes *Paul*, "how you live, not as unwise people but as wise." *Paul* intends us to be aware that our faith is not separate from our life. This idea that faith is an intellectual exercise about thoughts we have, beliefs we hold, and not about how we live is anathema to *Paul*. He says that is absurd, that how we live isn't shaped by how we believe and by our faith. (See Romans 6 for example.) So, be careful how you live, he says. Let your life bear witness to your faith.

There's no time to waste, he argues, the days are evil because we are on the brink of the new age. He isn't interested in fixing what is wrong in this world but preparing us for living in the next one. Consequently, say many commentators, he doesn't challenge the social order, but asks how we can make it as much like the kingdom of heaven as possible. Wait! Back up for a moment. Think about that idea – not fixing what is wrong in this world but preparing for living in the next one. Is that really what is going on here? Is that really how we've come to understand Paul (or *Paul*)? Or worse, is that how we've come to understand the faith? It's all about getting us into heaven, not about making a difference in the world in which we live?

If that were true, then The United Methodist Church is in big trouble. After all, we are in the business of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We are looking to make a difference in the world, right? Well, maybe not. Notice it doesn't say to make the world better, or to make a difference in the

world. Yes, that is how we sometimes hear that mission. Leave the world a little better than it was when you found it. Nice idea, but not really the gospel. We are in the business of transforming the world. This text, this author, isn't interested in fixing the world, but bringing in the next one. We are transforming this world into a kin-dom reality. Knowing, of course, that we can't do it alone, we can't do it by our efforts, but we can partner with the Spirit (remember we are in the season after Pentecost), as God brings in this new reality. It is not about going off somewhere to heaven but living in the new age of the kin-dom of God.

So, the days are evil, writes *Paul*, so be careful. Careful? Meaning we watch out for ourselves? We keep ourselves pure and unstained from the world? Well, yes and no. There is certainly a call to higher living—"live a life worthy of the call"—remember? Yet, this verse needs to say more than just watch out for yourself. It could also be read to say live full of care in a difficult time. There are many who are struggling; there are many who succumb to the demons of this age, to addiction, to hatred, to oppression, to fear, to lies. So, live full of care. Pay attention to the world around you, to the need around you, to the despair around you. Live fully invested in the kin-dom we proclaim, not in fear of the world that is less than that. It is hard to believe that this text, that any of the Pauline texts, are calling us to withdraw from a world in need of the gospel grace. Instead, we make the most of the time, not simply for ourselves. Not *primarily* for ourselves, but for the world that needs the community of faith to live out loud in transforming ways. In kin-dom ways.

But how? How do we maintain such an intense level of engagement? How do we sing the songs of faith with glad and joyful hearts at all times? These brief verses give us two directions for resourcing our inner strength. First, verse 18: it's not wine or any substance of this world, but the Spirit that is the source of our joy, of our giddiness. Yes, implied in these verses is the evidence that the Christian should be a person of joy. Not that there aren't moments of sorrow, times of struggle and of pain. But that the default mode for the follower of Christ is an attitude of joy that grows out of the second source of strength, gratitude.

"Giving thanks at all times and for everything . . .": This isn't just a lesson in etiquette, good advice for getting along with people and serving God. This is a core lesson of discipleship. Gratitude is a condition of the heart and a driver for all

sorts of action, ministry, and service. Gratitude is the foundation of discipleship. It requires an awareness of our need for grace and an appreciation of the source of that blessing. It is an aid to the entry of the Spirit, lowering the defenses and opening the mind and soul to that divine presence.

While this text points to the gratitude toward God, it is also the method of interaction within the human community. Because of our overwhelming gratitude toward God, we can also begin to appreciate one another and indeed all of creation as a part of that gift and a reminder of that presence. Giving thanks is behind, or underneath our journey of faith. It drives stewardship and mission. It brings us faithfully to worship week after week. It drives us to our knees in devotion and prayer. It opens the living Word of God as we explore the scriptures. Gratitude is the best motivator for evangelism. We tell the story because we are grateful for God's activity in our lives. When we practice in the life of the church the discipline of testimony, we are reminded to be thankful for blessings overlooked or gifts forgotten. "Giving thanks at all times and for everything . . ." It's a powerful way to live.

We are called to be full of care as we make our way through the world. What better way to exercise that care than with an attitude of gratitude?

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Armored

August 22, 2021 – [Ephesians 6:10-20](#)

Color: Green

INTRODUCTION

Accessorizing – that’s the image from the preaching notes that we might work with this week. The author of Ephesians wants us to realize that we are not left without resources as we seek to be made into disciples and to make disciples. In a way, this is the gear we have been “gearing up for life” throughout the series. So, what are these tools and how do we employ them in our daily lives?

The full answer to that question might more appropriately come during a Bible study or small-group effort following this worship experience. But we can provide directions and hints as we gather this week. So, look through the text and find the tools that are offered and note how they work in the life of the disciples of Jesus. Truth as a belt? Righteousness as a breastplate? How do these things function in our daily lives? These are the questions that can drive the shaping of the worship experience. (Spoiler alert: check the preaching notes for some help with this!) But the more you take the images and metaphors that make sense to you, that fit in your context, the more effective this will be for those who attend worship this week.

What songs can you sing that lift up truth and righteousness? As a part of the Methodist tradition, we are used to understanding our faith through our hymns. We can continue that tradition by singing songs like “A Mighty Fortress” or “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory” (“*his truth is marching on*”) What prayers can we pray to help us understand salvation as something more than a ticket to heaven? This faith that impacts our daily lives, not just an hour on Sunday, is a sustaining faith; a faith worth gearing up for.

An overall message to consider is that there is help available. Don’t feel like you have to make this journey all by yourself. These are the gifts and the graces that God provides to help us along the way. And above all is the sense of community that surrounds as we seek to make use of this gear. So, a part of what we can do this week is celebrate the community who walks with us as we follow Jesus on the

discipleship path. Yes, that is a common theme in this series. In fact, it could be argued it is a common theme in most worship experiences. We are here to praise God and to celebrate the community. Shifting from an individualized experience of faith to a corporate one is an important step on the path to discipleship. So, don't ever pass up the opportunity to lift up the community as a resource for disciple making.

PREACHING NOTES

How do you preach a passage people think they know already? The whole armor of God is the subject of a host of religious knickknacks, posters, mouse pads, coffee mugs; it's everywhere. So, how do we trot it out one more time without seeing people's eyes glaze over with faces of "been there, done that, currently wearing the t-shirt" looking back at us from the pews?

First, we shouldn't ever assume that. Sure, in some church contexts, there is a danger of the overly familiar. But given the current state of biblical illiteracy, you can be assured that there are those who have never heard the depiction of the armor of God from the sixth chapter of Ephesians. And of those who have heard it, many aren't so well versed on each item to render a refresher unnecessary.

Even so, how do we shift the metaphor so that it might speak anew in our age? There aren't many professions in our twenty-first-century world that require armor. There is, however, protective gear of all sorts. And the pandemic brought all that back into play in a powerful way. Instead of the helmet of salvation, maybe it is the facemask that brings us a sense of peace and protection. Play with the image, as you can. Find ways of capturing the spirit, even as you shift the main image.

What if, for example, Paul (or *Paul*, given the debate about the authorship of this letter), who claimed to be all things to all people, now takes on the role of fashion consultant? "Get all the gear, he says, the whole kit and caboodle. Okay, he does say armor, put on the whole armor, but what is meant is take every accessory you can lay your hands on. Get ready, get set, accessorize!

First, says *Yves St. Paul*, you need a belt. Now a belt is not just for keeping your pants up, as important as that is. But in that day, the belt was also used, by those going into battle, to tie up all those loose bits of clothing that would flap about and could be taken hold of by an opponent when least expected. With a belt you can avoid being caught out. So, “gird your loins” with the belt of truth. *Paul* says that truth can keep us from being caught out by the loose ends of our lies. As Abraham Lincoln supposedly said, “No one has a good enough memory to be a really effective liar.” We’re going to get caught if we try. But belted in truth, having made the decision to live honestly and openly to the truth of Christ, we won’t get caught with our pants down.

Next, says *Paul*, tucking the tailor’s chalk behind his ear, you’re going to need a breastplate. That is hardly something we see on every chest these days. Yet we all need something to protect those vital organs, so that we don’t get hit in the gut, so that we don’t suffer from a wounded heart. So, we need a chest protector to strap on to keep our heart in one piece – the breastplate of righteousness. Righteousness, it has been said, is being faithful in our relationships. God is righteous because God always keeps faith with us, because God keeps God’s part of the covenant. So, we try to be like God; we try to be righteous and keep faithful in all our relationships. First, our relationship with God, of course, as we try to live our lives in response to the grace we have received. But also in our relationships with one another: we work to keep faith between husbands and wives, parents and children, teachers and students, neighbors, brothers and sisters, and all. We wear our righteousness like a chest protector so that we avoid the sinking feeling in our gut when we have broken faith with a loved one, so that we avoid receiving a broken heart.

And shoes, gotta have shoes. We have to be able to walk all over God’s earth, to run, if we can. So, we must have shoes that let us move. On our feet, we need the readiness to proclaim the gospel of peace. These shoes are made for walkin’. They are not for sitting back, for putting our feet up, for barricading ourselves in our homes and saying, “Oh, well, if anyone wants to know, if they come to me and ask, and really look interested and if I’m not too busy then I just might tell them what I know about faith and church and Christ.” No, sir! These shoes are for getting out on the town, for cutting a rug, for going where the action is. On your feet, the readiness to proclaim the gospel of peace.

Well, proclaims *Paul Blass*, as he admires his creation, we're not done yet. You need a shield. A shield? Well, okay, how about an umbrella? Something to hold over you, to go before you, to protect you from the elements, to keep you dry when the weather turns nasty. Something to hold out and to hold on to, something that will remind you that it isn't always a bright sunny day when all is right with the world. Sometimes the skies do grow dark; sometimes the winds will blow; sometimes rain will fall. So you need something to keep you from drowning in your own despair.

Take the umbrella of faith and hold on tight. When the weather gets rough, when the questions fall like rain, when the tears form puddles at your feet, when the clouds of doubt rumble overhead, then hold tight to your faith. Hold on to that knowledge that you are a child of God, to the experience of being pulled up from off your knees by the hand of one much stronger than you, to that feeling of being made clean again and given a fresh start. Hold on to that; and though the rain may fall, and you may get wet along the way, the center is dry and strong and still remembers that the sun still shines behind the clouds. Carry faith as your shield.

And now, the crowning glory, accept salvation as a helmet. Wear your salvation on top of everything else. Wear it right up there where everyone can see it. Salvation, like faith, is not a voucher that stands ready to be cashed in at the pearly gate ticket booth. It is not a memento toward which you look wistfully thinking I'll need that one day. No, it is something you wear every day, something that shapes your vision, guides your feet, broadens your understanding. This visor enables you to see more clearly, to see God in the faces of those called other in this divided world, to see brothers and sisters in the marginalized and oppressed. It helps you see not your own safety and security, but all of creation bound up with you in the kin-dom of God. Salvation is a gift of love, a divine gift that lets you see beyond the human into the kin-dom of God where you have a place, and it is assurance that can protect you from all sorts of blows that might otherwise knock you senseless. Accept salvation as a helmet.

And a sword. A sword? Well, yes. But not just any old sword with which you can go hacking away at the undergrowth of our society. This sword has a specific function, and it is a function that you don't ultimately control. It is the sword of

the Spirit, which is the word of God. Perhaps we should be carrying a pen or a phone with unlimited texting. This sword is about words. This sword is not about taking away life but about giving life meaning. It's about communicating God's word. It is God who wields the power here, not us. It is God whose word cuts to the quick, where soul and Spirit meet. Our job is to be faithful to that word, to proclaim it with our whole life, with all our collective lives as the body of Christ, the word made flesh. This means, of course, that we know what God's word is. To take up this sword, to wield this pen, this communication device takes a lifetime of study.

Put on the whole gear, accessorize to the hilt, says our fashion consultant *Paul*. Why? Why do we need all these extra bits, all these accessories? To stand. "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand." To stand, that's what this is about. It's a shaky world out there, and it needs people with balance, people who are accessorized, who are armored enough to stand.