

Sermon for July 29, 2018
“The Body of Christ: The Power of Love”

Ephesians 3:14-21

Have you read the papers or listened to the news lately? It seems that the world is falling apart. There is violence in the Middle East. There's violence in our own country. It seems that all that is good and decent is being abandoned. And things that are vile are being lifted up as good.

In some places in our world Christians are being persecuted and martyred. In others they are simply being ignored. So, what can we do? How can we bring peace to a world that seems bent of war? How can we preach love to a world that is so consumed by hate that it sees no reason? How do we teach righteousness to a world that doesn't even have the word in their dictionary? How can we create justice in a world that perverts it?

It seems a lost cause. It seems that true righteousness has lost. The church, the body of Christ, seems so small in the face of the world's troubles. We seem so few in numbers and so weak. What can we do to make a difference in this world? Sometimes it even seems that the world will win.

I believe the passage we read from Ephesians addresses this issue. Today's sermon is the third in a series that goes through the Book of Ephesians. The book of Ephesians speaks of the church as the Body of Christ. In our previous lessons we have learned that as the Body of Christ we are blessed and that we are reconciled and united. Today's lesson speaks of the power we have been given as the Body of Christ to address the needs of the World.

You see the Ephesians thought their world was falling apart. The picture that Ephesians paints is that Paul the Apostle, the one who had brought them the gospel, was in prison. Things did not look good for him, in fact, they were not good. He had been in prison for years and it seemed he would never get out and resume his ministry or spreading the Gospel. According to tradition Paul was eventually beheaded.

It seemed to the Christians in Ephesus that the powers of evil were winning. Their persecutors had managed to keep Paul imprisoned for years. And it appeared that they would silence him for good. So, Paul wrote a letter to the Ephesians. A letter to try to encourage them.

This letter contains a prayer. A prayer for the Ephesians, but also a prayer for us. A prayer to help them, and Christians down through the ages, face the troubles of this world. A prayer that God would show them the true power they had been given.

In the passage we read this morning Paul is praying. He says he is bowing his knees. We are used to this as being a traditional posture for prayer. We are accustomed to coming to altar railing to kneel in prayer or kneeling by the bed for our evening prayers. Did you know that Methodists were once referred to as “kneeling Methodists” by those who derided us? I wish that our enemies would still call us that today. But in Judaism the more traditional posture is standing looking up with arms held open. After all God is in heaven not in your hands. But here Paul specifically says he is kneeling before God. This is the posture of one who is coming before God humbly in supplication. It is the posture of one who is begging for something.

Paul is begging for the well being of the church in Ephesus. He is asking God to help them, to give them strength. He is making a humble supplication on their behalf. Praying for them in their hour of need.

As a pastor who prays for his church I can understand this. I have always believed that a pastor's job is not just to teach, preach, counsel, and administer but first and foremost to pray for the church. I heard a story once about a preacher who was known for wearing out the tops of the toes of her shoes before the heels or soles. he spent so much time kneeling in prayer that the toes of her shoes would rub against the floor and be worn out. I have always wanted to be like that. I can imagine her kneeling at this altar as I have often done, praying for the church. Seeking God's will and direction. Seeking God's help and strength in the midst of difficulties.

But what specifically does Paul say when he prays. First, he says that he is bowing his knee "before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named." (vs. 15). Paul is reminding the Ephesians that God is Father of all humanity whether some people recognize it or not. Even our enemies are our brothers and sisters. Even the people imprisoning Paul and who would behead him are people loved by God. Even the people persecuting Christians and killing them in our world are children of God by creation. Even terrorists who murder innocent children are people loved by God and for whom Jesus suffered and died on the cross.

It is important that we remember that. We should never allow the evil of the world to drive us to hate. We are called to love the sinner while we hate the sin. Jesus gave us the supreme example of this love when he prayed for the forgiveness of the very people crucifying him. We can hate the acts of violence and hatred in our world, but we must love the sinner; even those who kill innocents and martyr Christians.

But there is more to this. God is not just the Father in terms of loving all people. God has authority over all people just as a father has authority over his children. He is the Father of the great human family and we are working with him. Because we have chosen to side with God our victory is assured no matter how bad things seem to get. No matter how many of God's servants are imprisoned or killed.

This is the point from which the rest of Paul's prayer takes off. He prays to God that they may be strengthened through Christ so that they be grounded in love and know the love of Christ. This is the power that sustained the church in those early years: the love of God. When we accept Christ, God gives us his Holy Spirit and one of the essential gifts the Spirit gives us is Love. That love will strengthen us. It will enable us to strive and persevere against the evil of this world. Not because we hate the world, but because we love it and want to see it saved.

I know sometimes things seem bleak. It seems at times that all the good in the world is gone. But that is exactly how it must have appeared to the Ephesians. And Paul was killed. But the church not only survived! It grew! It went from being a tiny group of believers to being the religion of a third of the world's population.

That is the power of Love. So, I pray today that you would know this power. That you would be aware of the gift that the Holy Spirit has already put within you. The power not to tear down, but to build up. The power of the Love of God the Father exemplified by the sacrifice of the Son and given by the Holy Spirit. And that grounded in this love you may know the extent of God's love and in knowing be filled with the presence of God! Then you can face the evil of this world with the power of Love!