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John 6:56-69

Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18

Psalm 34:15-22

Ephesians 6:10-20

August 22, 2021

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

How often does church make you uncomfortable?

I hope it does frequently and here's why...we weren't called to follow Jesus to be comfortable. Faith, when prophetic and truthful, is at times rather troublesome. And I want to argue that this discomfort may be one of the best things that can happen to us as Christians.

Discomfort is a central theme that comes up time and time again in scripture and I want us to spend some time with it this morning. So, let me first ask you this (and this is a tricky question to answer honestly)...why do *you* follow Jesus?

Let me explain why I ask this particular question. Many of us follow Jesus because we want things like forgiveness and comfort and hope. And, those are all extremely good reasons to follow Jesus. In fact, they are essential. But, they are also reasons focused on us as individuals, our own needs, our own struggles. In this way, we follow Jesus because we get something good out of it. We get a sense of identity. We get a sense of purpose and direction. We get something to believe in. Again...all good and essential.

But with those things comes a cautionary tale. It's easy to slip into the trap of allowing our faith to become too self-centered. Or, worse, allowing faith to become a way to extol our personal values, opinions, and beliefs over and above someone else...especially when that someone else has pushed our buttons...ethically, politically, morally. Then, faith is often (consciously or unconsciously) the perfect way to draw a protective line between you and them.

It's a hard thing to reflect upon. It's hard because when we are honest, we have all fallen into this trap of a self-centered faith at one time or another. And, it's not a fun part of ourselves to recognize or to name.

But, Jesus says if you are going to follow me, you can't just take what you can get. You have to give what you receive. The two go hand in hand. And, for some of us, that call to examine our intentions or to give to others what we may not want to share, can be uncomfortable.

This is where we find Paul this week in his letter to the Ephesians. And, let me put a little context behind Paul's message. New Testament scholar, Bart Ehrman, states that the main purpose of Paul's message is to remind his Gentile readers that, "even though they were formerly alienated from God and his people, Israel, they have now been made one through the work of Jesus – one with the Jews through Jesus' work of reconciliation and one with God through his work of redemption." That's what the Ephesians have received.

Ehrman goes on to state, "Jesus' death has torn down the barrier that previously divided Jew and Gentile...so that both groups are now absolutely equal...they can live in harmony with one another without the divisiveness of the Law." ¹That's what they now need to give to each other...unity.

So, Paul is holding up a mirror and asking the Ephesians some very tough questions. Things like who are they going to serve. And not just who they are going to serve but how are they going to serve toward this message of unity. He knows it's an uncomfortable question because following Jesus has implications and at times, we might not be too fond of what we are called to do.

Paul gets it and so he puts our service to Christ in the context of battle...something tangible we can relate to. But he does something fascinating...he flips what we at first might understand as a rigid battle of good over evil, of the powerful over the powerless. In fact, he makes it impossible to hold oneself in a position of power in the kind of battle he describes.

For Paul, serving Christ means grounding oneself in full service to one another...that's the unity he is talking about. Of taking self-centeredness and turning it into other-centeredness. That's the nature of the resistance, the battle, Paul is describing. And I think it is safe to say that the battle will often play out within our own hearts, the battle of how we follow Jesus even when it's uncomfortable.

How does this play out in Paul's teaching? He cautions us that when we are faced with evil within our own hearts or within the hearts of others, we aren't to meet that evil with anger or aggression – physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Instead, we are to look into the heart of the other and put down our defenses. Put down our need to be right. Put down our need to have power or influence or pride. Those kinds of armor have no place for Paul or any Jesus follower for that matter.

We are called to put down our self-protective facades and to put on a different kind of armor. And, I love how each piece of armor is defined...a belt of truth, a breastplate of righteousness, a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation, and a sword of Spirit. Truth, righteousness, faith, salvation and Spirit.

Paul also recognizes that this is not an easy thing to do. Because all too often, as soon as something gets hard, as soon as we don't like what we hear, as soon as anyone or any institution (and this may be especially true of the church) pushes up against our version of morality or justice or ethics we tend pull out our real swords and go at it.

Swords are accusations. Swords of hate. Swords of anger.

¹ Ehrman, Bart D. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 4th Edition. Oxford University Press, 2007. p.389.

But, Paul's battle does not come through this kind of division or self-centeredness. It comes through a Spirit-filled commitment to living a Christ centered life with one another. It comes to those places where we are deeply uncomfortable and asks us to roll up our sleeves. We come to the battle field with openness for what we can do together, not with hardened hearts as a divided community. Because real strength is the embodiment of peace. And, peace is, without a doubt, vulnerable. But that's how we finally get at unity.

As Gary Hall, former Dean of the National Cathedral once stated, "Following Jesus entails some risk. It means signing on to some values that push deeply against the culture. It involves a willingness to stand with people who can do nothing for you. It asks that you find your fulfillment not on your own but in mutuality and communion with others."²

We aren't always going to hear what we want to hear from your denomination or from the Bible or even from your priest. (As shocking as that may be!) But, when we approach those challenging moments and we feel a dividing line being drawn, we can go back to Paul's admonition to put on the armor of God...to put on truth and righteousness and peace. And put down anger, hatred, and judgement.

As a poem by Steve Garnaas-Holmes called the *Armor of God* states,

You can't wear two suits of armor at once.
Wear either the armor of defensiveness,
the armor of being right, of superior power;
or the armor of God: the armor of love.

Dare to walk into this world
unshielded from hurt and disappointment,
unprotected except by your faith in grace
and your trust in the Love at the heart of all things.
Be willing to be wrong, to be humiliated,
to be powerless, to suffer for love.
Let there be no armor, no barrier
between you and life.³

And, let us add...let there be no barrier between you and me. Amen.

² <https://faithandleadership.com/gary-r-hall-following-jesus-will-always-be-minority-enterprise>

³ <https://www.unfoldinglight.net/>