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John 6:56-69
Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18
Psalm 34:15-22
Ephesians 6:10-20

August 25, 2024
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

This morning, I want you to play a little game with me.

Raise your hand as high as you can. Hold it there. Now...raise it even more. What happened? Hopefully, you found that you could raise your hand higher than you thought possible.

I've been working with the same concept in the gym. When I can't lift one more rep, when I think I've reached my limit I ask myself one question..."*What would it feel like if I did one more rep.*" And guess what? Most every single time, I can do one more rep. And, more often than not, that one more rep turns into two.

You can apply this game to just about anything. What it is doing is uncovering that moment when we think we have done all we can do but we realize we can do more. When we face what is uncomfortable and decide to keep growing.

I especially like to apply this lesson to faith, to being a follower of Jesus. Because like it or not, following Jesus can be downright uncomfortable, if not exhausting at times. I know we tend to talk a lot about love and peace and joy when it comes to a life of faith...but what about those things we don't like to talk about? What about those moments where we don't want to raise our hands any higher?

It's a quandary for us Christians. Because none of us wants to be uncomfortable.

Let's be honest...many of us follow Jesus because we want things like forgiveness and comfort and hope. 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. And, we follow Jesus because we get something good out of it. We get a sense of purpose and direction. It's comfortable. 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 the perfect way to maintain our comfort. To just reach as high as we choose without overextending ourselves.

This is where we find Paul this week in his letter to the Ephesians. Paul is writing to an audience who have found themselves struggling with their comfort level. So, Paul starts asking them some very tough questions.

He pushes them to reflect on what a life in Christ should look like. He uses the metaphor of a battle...something tangible they can relate to. But he does something fascinating with the imagery...Paul's battle isn't with one another, it isn't a battle between people. It's the battle we encounter within our own hearts. The battle between our comfort and our discomfort.

Paul notices that our discomfort will often manifest against someone else through anger or aggression – physically, emotionally, or spiritually. And so he encourages the Ephesians to start looking into the hearts of the other, to put down our defenses and our need to be right, to face our discomfort and our difference. To be willing to grow.

This is the armor Paul describes. And armor that isn't about shielding us from the world, but an armor that gives us strength to move into the world. 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.

Paul uses the image of armor because he knows living into our growth as people of faith, reaching beyond our comfort, learning to love and live together 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 to pull out our real swords and go at it.

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

We refuse to grow.

But Paul encourages us to come to this battlefield we have created with openness for what we can do together, not with hardened hearts as a divided community.

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."¹

This is the reach. The extra rep. The raised hand.

¹ <https://faithandleadership.com/gary-r-hall-following-jesus-will-always-be-minority-enterprise>

Moving into a place of growth. Allowing ourselves to dwell in the space in between – where sometimes there aren't easy answers. Where sometimes life will make us uncomfortable. Where we are going to have to face our divisions and differences. But Jesus knows – we certainly won't build a better tomorrow if we put our hands down and walk away.

Because, folks, we haven't done all that we can do. We haven't reached as far as we can. There is work to do and God needs us to reach. Amen.