

The Spirit gives life

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, August 26, 2018

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16, Year B)

(1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69)

Ephesians 6:10-20 (NRSV): Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

John 6:56-69 (NRSV): [Jesus said] “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

The Rev. Todd Cederberg was a colleague of mine in Pennsylvania. At the time, Todd was an associate at the Church of the Good Samaritan in Paoli. Todd discovered early in his ministry the significance of personal financial troubles in the lives of his parishioners. So Todd took classes in financial planning to support his parishioners. I asked Todd to lead a class on Christian Finances at St. Mark’s in Honey Brook, where I served at the time. Now, you might think that Todd would say things such as “give 10% of your income to the church, and God will make you rich.” First of all, God never promises to make you rich. And secondly, God has a lot to say about how you use the other 90% of your income.

But Todd didn’t talk about either of those things. He started instead with standard financial advice: buy low, sell high. Delay gratification and save before spending. Don’t always follow the crowd. Plan for the things that are truly important. These are standard pillars of wisdom that most folks already know. So why do we have such financial problems? Todd answered that question in his class by showing us a photo of our biggest problem in financial management. He showed us a photo of our brains.

You see, even though we know good advice, we don't follow it. We want gratification now, we buy when everyone else is buying and sell when everyone else is selling. We don't know how to shape our instincts to value the things of real value. And we don't automatically know what has true value that we might plan appropriately. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. It turns out that the things that most impact our financial health are really spiritual things. We need to know what is important, we need to know how to be submitted to values that clash with our impulses. We need not only wisdom, but understanding of what is true and what is truly valuable. The material world cannot help us with these most important questions. As Jesus says in today's gospel reading, "It is the spirit that gives life."

Jesus spoke to the crowds and his followers saying "I am the bread of life...those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will abide in me...and have life." We recognize a reference to Holy Communion, where with bread and wine we celebrate Christ present with us. However, the crowds did not understand, and they took Jesus literally. But Jesus wasn't talking literally. He was talking about a spiritual relationship with him—abiding in him in a spiritual relationship. The Spirit gives life, Jesus says.

I should say clearly that Christians are not anti-material or anti-physical.¹ After all, God came to this physical and material world in Jesus. God cares about what we do in the material world and in our material lives. But like Todd's talk on money, those material lives turn out empty unless they start with a healthy spiritual life—in a particular spiritual life that comes from a relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

When Paul writes to the Ephesians in today's lesson, Paul is in chains—physically persecuted for preaching about Jesus. He writes to Ephesians who are also physically threatened as Christians. And yet, his encouragement is not based on physical armor. Rather, the full armor of God is made of spiritual resources. The Spirit gives life.

In our Old Testament reading, King Solomon dedicates the great Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. This was an incredibly important sacred space. However, it was not important as a building, but as a place where people could seek and find the presence of the living God. When the people only cared about the temple as a symbol of national pride or when they made only empty ceremonies there without truly following God in their lives, the value of the temple was gone. God left the temple, and the armies of Babylon came in and destroyed it. The Spirit gives life.

When I say "the spirit gives life," I don't mean just any spirit or any sort of spirituality. So often we think "spirituality" means a vague sort of feeling, a kind of spirituality that is whatever you want it to be. But when Paul writes about the full armor of God, he starts with the belt of truth. The spirit that gives life is the Holy Spirit of God. Knowing who is truly God (and who is truly *not* God), and knowing what God truly calls us to is important. In all the possible options of spirituality on the market today, we need to know what is really true. If finding out what really has value impacts our physical and material lives, then we need to know what is true. So we start with the belt of truth—the truth of God in Jesus Christ.

¹ This error (an assumed dualism between spirit and the material world, where the material world is evil) is part of the heresy of Gnosticism, addressed early in church history.

We also need more than just intellectual belief. We need a living practice in our lives to abide in Jesus. So we put on the breastplate of righteousness. Righteousness is walking in right relationship with God. We learn what is valuable and how to live aligned with that value, based in God. Remember also that righteousness is not just a program of self-improvement. We do not live simply for ourselves, but we are made to share the blessings of God. So our feet are shod with the eagerness to proclaim the good news of God's peace. That eagerness is a spiritual resource that makes a difference in the material world. The Spirit gives life.

Today we will hear more about Stephen Ministry, an important pastoral care ministry. Stephen Ministers are not advice givers or problem solvers. Instead, Stephen Ministers provide spiritual resources. Their feet are shod with an eagerness to share the good news of God's peace. If you are very practically minded, you might think that this ministry would be useless to your real problems in life. And yet many, many people here will tell you how much of an impact those spiritual resources have on their temporal lives. The Spirit gives life.

Of course, we all face challenges. Not, as Paul notes, challenges of just flesh and blood, but spiritual challenges as well. So we have the shield of faith that quenches the flaming arrows of the evil one. Think of all the lies the devil tells us. Especially when things are hard, we hear "you are not good enough for God,"² or "God doesn't love you" or "it will never get better" or "since you are suffering, God must not be there for you." These lies hurt our souls and poison our material lives too. But our faith quenches these lies. Our faith is not simply a good feeling of optimism. Our faith is a faith in someone—faith is trust in someone—trust in Jesus, trust in God.

We trust God even when we do not understand. We trust God even when we do not know the way forward. We trust that God's love for us is more powerful than anything that we are going through, even when we are defeated. That is faith—and faith is a gift from God. Faith is a spiritual resource that makes a difference in our lives especially when our lives are beyond our understanding. For the Spirit gives faith, and the Spirit gives life.

We take the helmet of salvation—our protection comes not from our own strength, but from God's saving grace—a free gift that Jesus gives to us. And the one weapon in Paul's list is the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. God's good news to us, God's word in Holy Scripture, guides and advances us in the challenges we face in our spiritual life. We learn truth. We learn righteousness, we learn and share the good news of God's peace, we grow in faith and see more clearly our salvation.

Notice that Paul and the Ephesians face physical challenges. They are persecuted in physical and material ways. Paul is in chains. And yet, Paul can rejoice, Paul can continue his ministry. And Paul shares the spiritual resources that bring him the victory. Because the Spirit gives life.

Our material lives do matter to God. Our physical lives do matter to God. Our physical lives of delight and suffering and daily living matter to God. But the meaning of these material and physical lives is found in the one who created us and gave us these physical lives. Jesus said "I

² Of course, none of us is good enough for God, but God loves us anyway! The devil makes lies out of half-truths...

am the bread of life, the bread from heaven.” God came to us in our material and physical world to give us this life, and to give it to us in abundance.

The more that we abide in Jesus, living in relationship with God in Jesus, the more deeply we drink of the spiritual life that God gives us. And the more we abide in God, the more blessed our temporal lives will be.

You may not believe me. OK. Try it. Start each day before work or school or your daily routine, asking God to show you a greater understanding of the experiences that lie before you. I believe that if you do this long enough, day by day, God will make an impact on your life in a tangible way.

May God bless you with his Holy Spirit to lead you into all truth and the true abundant life that the Spirit gives.