

Message for April 15, 2018

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passages: Ephesians 5:15-21 and 6:10-17

The household of God, part #2

Bruce and I are very house-conscious these days. This past week a photographer came to take pictures of our house, our condo, for the realtor to put up on a website.

Tomorrow the realtor will come over to walk through our house with us to see what final things we need to do before he starts showing it to potential buyers. Already we have been spending lots of time cleaning, repairing, cleaning, sorting, decluttering, cleaning. It's amazing how many nooks and crannies there are to clean. And how much junk accumulates in those nooks and crannies. And how many decisions we have to make – do we keep this or throw it away?

As we've been doing this, I've been thinking about a similar process happening here in this household of God. It's not as drastic, of course. You're staying put. No realtors are knocking on these church doors. But still this is a time of transition; it is good and necessary to spend some time thinking about what is useful to us as a faithful community of Jesus Christ. What is it that we really need going forward. What are those things that are worth keeping? What do we need to throw away?

The original purpose of the letter to the Ephesians was to build up and encourage the early church in Ephesus as they figured out what it means to be the household of God. This letter is full of practical advice most of which remains very relevant to us centuries later. The writer knows that a commitment to following Christ Jesus in the real world, though life-giving, is not particularly easy. In fact, it is usually very counter-cultural. It requires a willingness to see things from a completely different perspective.

For instance, in a culture where a high percentage of folks were servants or slaves, where women were the property of men, the writer says to these Jesus followers in Ephesus – men, women, slaves and free: “Be subject to one another out of reverence of Christ.” In other words, don’t stay stuck in the societal patterns and expectations of how things should be. Instead for the sake of justice and righteousness, upset the fruit basket. Always and in every case, put yourselves second and others first. Make consideration for each other your default no matter what your position or your perceived rights might be. This is not the way of the world where status is everything, but it is the way of Jesus. Hold onto this, dear people. Keep it front and center as you go forward. “Be subject to one another out of reverence of Christ.”

The way of the world is generally not the way of Christ. In this day and age we might not see things in the same terms that resonated in the ancient world – “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” – but we do recognize that there is much in our culture, in our societal structures, in our everyday assumptions that pull us away from God and God’s ways. It is a powerful tide. Drunkenness and debauchery – two of Paul’s favorites – might not be the particular things we struggle with but I bet most of us can identify with quarreling and jealousy. We can also identify with greed and selfishness, which is sometimes justified as a desire to protect ourselves or families. Perhaps we are hard-hearted and self-righteous, dismissing the needs of those around us, chalking them up as a failure of character, making folks unworthy of our consideration. Or perhaps we’re lazy, complacent, unwilling to enter into what may push us out of our comfort zone or demand

too much of our attention. This list could go on, but you get the picture. You know who you are and what it is that you struggle with, what powers of darkness are most insidious for you.

These things, my friends, are like the dirt which accumulates in those nooks and crannies, the junk that piles up on those dusty back shelves of our household of God. We have to face the mess and make some decisions – what to keep, what to throw away. We need to get our house in order. What are the tools we can use? What will help us present a house that is clean and strong and ready to withstand the pressures against it?

The writer of Ephesians has a suggestion: Put on the whole armor of God. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul calls this “the armor of light.” If you really want to clean house and set things right, put on this protective gear. Take up these powerful tools. God offers us the help we need to do what needs to be done.

So, here we are, ready to face the music, ready to deep clean the house, ready to decide what to keep and what to throw away. Let’s put on our protective gear and pick up the powerful tools. What happens when we put on the whole armor of God, the armor of light? Let’s see....

First, fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the bullet-proof vest of right living. If you’ve become skilled at rationalizing why it’s OK to fudge on your taxes or why you need the newest i-phone or tablet, or why you are more deserving of these things than others, commit yourself to facing up to this. Put on the belt of truth, tighten it around your waist, even if it pinches. Let it shape you. Let it pull you in. Let the truth hold you together and set your feet on a new path. Then choose to act in ways that are right – right for you, right for your neighbors, right for the world. Let consideration of

others be your default position. Acting rightly in the way of God's Spirit is your protection, it is your bullet-proof vest, a valuable part of the armor of light.

“Take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” There are plenty of flaming arrows out there. Plenty of urgent and attractive messages whose purpose it is to convince you to put yourself first at all cost. Plenty of vitriol against those who are different or think differently. Plenty of temptations to exploit the innocence or the blindness or the needs of others for your own benefit. Plenty of reasons why all these things are OK. These flaming arrows are not to be taken lightly. They are powerful and they can start real fires. We need protection. We need a faith that is strong and which covers us from head to toe. Take up the shield of faith; it is a vital part of the armor of light.

“Take the helmet of salvation.” Paul often speaks of changed thinking, the renewal of the mind. This is both an ongoing process and a new birth kind of thing. It is both the life-changing realization that we truly are acceptable in God's eyes – which is our salvation – *and* it is the need for us to keep working on what it means to live into this salvation. When we put on the helmet of salvation it focuses and protects our minds. It keeps us from going off on the wrong track. It doesn't allow us to forget who we are. This right focus and sense of protection is a crucial part of the armor of light.

And finally, take up “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Along with all the protection, we are given a tool, the sword of the Spirit. This is a powerful tool. It has the ability to effect change, to cut away that which is creating harm and neglect. It can open up new ways of thinking. It can disarm hurtful messages and render them powerless. The sword of the Spirit is empowered by God and therefore is never

used to tear down but instead to prepare the way for building up. God's word is the challenging word of peace among nations, among peoples, among friends and among enemies. It is the word of peace and well-being for our own lives. The sword of the Spirit is in indeed a powerful tool. It is an integral part of the armor of light.

The whole armor of God both protects us and shapes us. We cannot put it on and then somehow ignore that it is there. To wear it and use it is to be changed. Putting on the armor of light means allowing the Holy Spirit to guide the process of deciding what to keep and what to discard. It is housecleaning on the highest level. It is both preparation for and a necessary part of living into new life as the household of God.

“Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power,” says the writer of the letter to the Ephesians. I want to leave you with those same words today. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of God's power. Live as wise people, not unwise. Be subject to one another. Encourage, support and build up one another. Always see each other's good your own. Worship together, pray together, play together. Do all this wearing the armor of light: The belt of truth, the bullet-proof vest of right living, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of truth. Allow this armor to shape and transform you, to get rid of the junk, the things that are harmful, to strengthen your faith, and to keep this household of God in good working order for the sake of Christ and the world.

If the Lord is our strength and our salvation, whom shall we fear? You go with God, my beloved congregation. You go with God. Amen.