

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Ephesians 6:13-17
Mark 1:21-28

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Road to Shiloh: The Way of the Christian Warrior

A little less than 5 years ago we baptized our youngest child. For the service, several of our extended family members came into town. I remember one arrival scene at the airport well. People were getting off the plane and coming out the doors of the secure area and there was Crystal's grandma, Granny we call her. She was so happy to see us, because in general she is a nervous person and I am sure our faces were a welcome site after a long plane ride.

Then she saw our youngest child, still a baby, who was to be baptized and she said, something that caused me to do a double take. She said in a very loud voice and piercing voice, "Ohhhhh my goodness....it's my little Christian soldier."

I remember being really embarrassed by the comment and the way she announced it in the airport made me feel like she had someone outed us as those people that believe in things like....God. However, I think what bothered me the most was the image her words had painted. My daughter, a soldier? I didn't like the warlike image in my head of a small child, less than one year old, as anything weaponized.

A friend of my commented this week of how we weaponized a lot of things in our culture. People have weaponized the Bible for political ends, people have weaponized bodies for violence or perpetration, and even we as people have weaponized love by saying who is truly a child of God and who is not.

I want us to take a minute to imagine a scene from history. Rome in early the early 60's, not 1960...60 as in the 1st century. There you stand outside a small room guarded by soldiers. There is a man hunched over a table, writing intently. From the way he squints at the parchment, you can tell his eyesight is failing. A Roman soldier stands over his shoulder, and despite this he continues to write. As he finishes he takes the scroll, gives it a last look, rolls it up, and seals it. Then he stands and hands the scroll to a man standing to the side. You hardly noticed him amidst the fully clad soldiers in his plain tunic.

“Tychichus, take this letter from church to church, to each community I have visited. Begin in Ephesus. I know how hard it has been for them. It will not get any easier. Read them these words and impart the peace of Christ Jesus. Tell them that I do not know if I will ever see them again.”¹

Tychichus takes the letter, kisses Paul on both cheeks, and embraces him. He then departs on a journey along many roads. A journey that would make the letter be at least the beginnings of what we know as the letter to the Ephesians. A message at the end of the letter is our scripture for today, that comes after a powerful list of offerings to the Ephesians on how to live, to order life and home, and how to share the Peace of Christ among neighbors.

Ephesians 6:13-17 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹³ Therefore, pick up the full armor of God so that you can stand your ground on the evil day and after you have done everything possible to still stand. ¹⁴ So stand with the belt of truth around your waist, justice

¹ This section recreating Paul's time, was heavily borrowed and copied from Rev. Marianne Niesen's sermon to St. Paul's UMC in Helena, Montana on August 23, 2015

as your breastplate, ¹⁵ and put shoes on your feet so that you are ready to spread the good news of peace. ¹⁶ Above all, carry the shield of faith so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word.

From literary analysis, we don't believe Paul actually compiled the letter we now have in our scriptures; however, it was his teachings that the final writer used to create this sacred text. From history, we know Paul writes in a time of relative stability for the region in which he lived. However, the Pax Romana, or Roman rule's peace was kept with an iron fist of violence. Caesar was known as the Lord of Lords and King of Kings, Prince of Peace, Son of God, and Savior of the World. To proclaim that a Jewish peasant from Israel was those things, would have been seen as treason, because absolute allegiance was owed to Caesar and the ways of Rome. Roman soldiers would march the streets reminding all subjects that the Divine Caesar was the one to be worshipped.

And yet as Paul sat in his prison cell, he saw an image near him that his communities of Jesus followers might understand, a Roman soldier would be an image they could all understand, it could be a metaphor to ground them in their call of being a different kind of warrior, one equipped with the Peace of Christ.

Our forebearers at Shiloh and in United Methodism have believed in this understanding of sharing the piece of Christ...today on the alter we have put a piece of history to remind us others have traveled this journey to Shiloh too, and are urging us on still...a reminder that there are stories behind every part of the roundabout of faith.

This image of the roundabout we are using now is like Paul's image. It is a common image we all understand. We know the difficult and ease of roundabouts. We know the ways we come and go from roundabouts, and how we can either hate them or love them. Church like a roundabout can be all of those metaphors for people. Church can be a place that equip us with Peace, Hope, Love, and Joy of Christ, it can be a place of difficult or ease, a place we can range from loving deeply to despising out of concern. It is a place we journey to, and then journey away from transformed by the experience we had there.

In December, we had a great opportunity to partner with brothers and sisters at the Jewish synagogue in Billings to share an Interfaith Solstice Service of light and music. At the service, we heard messages shared deeply from both traditions about where they find light on the darkest night of the year, in the darkest season of the year.

As we were planning the service I sat here in our worship space with the 3 women from the synagogue helping me plan the service. We were just getting to know each other, talking about our lives and sharing things we were all struggling with. One of the woman shared that her mother suffered from increasing levels of dementia. Her mother lived in a care facility and her father had to live somewhere else for cost and that he did not need the same level of care. She shared that when her father was not present with her mother, because of the dementia, her mother believed her dad was off with another woman.

Imagine for a minute being with a person for years, decades of your life and then suddenly believing that when they were gone from you, they were doing things with someone else, even cheating on you. Imagine also the pain for the daughter, and especially the father, having to convince the mother each time of the love they still had for her. We know increasing numbers of people all around us suffering from cognitive diseases that come on in mid to later years of life.

Then another one of the women gathered with us said, “Get a picture of your dad and your mom from when they were younger, and put it in a prominent place.” She explained that it might not work, but it could help their mother remember the days of love in her past, and perhaps be a gentle nudge and reminder that the support was still there.

Our gospel story this morning comes from Mark 1.

Mark 1:21-28 Common English Bible (CEB)

²¹ Jesus and his followers went into Capernaum. Immediately on the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and started teaching. ²² The people were amazed by his teaching, for he was teaching them with authority, not like the legal experts. ²³ Suddenly, there in the synagogue, a person with an evil spirit screamed, ²⁴ “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the holy one from God.”

²⁵ “Silence!” Jesus said, speaking harshly to the demon. “Come out of him!” ²⁶ The unclean spirit shook him and screamed, then it came out.

²⁷ Everyone was shaken and questioned among themselves, “What’s this? A new teaching with authority! He even commands unclean spirits and they obey him!” ²⁸ Right away the news about him spread throughout the entire region of Galilee.

This scripture raises the questions of what demons are our neighbors dealing with today. Jesus in the scriptures calls demons by name to leave people, and in turn people are able to find compassion for those suffering from debilitating conditions. Demons are those things that isolate people from one another in our world, that drive them to be alone and trapped in their condition. It drives others of us to lose compassion for them, and feel like we are powerless to support them.

Yet as people of faith, Paul calls us to equip people with Peace, Hope, Love and Joy to speak with the authority of Christ, and to call out demons...to reconnect us to one another again.

Many of you know we have begun a new ministry here at Shiloh called Aging WeLL. The goal so far has been to provide resources for people in their aging, and those supporting them to have a more abundant life as they age.

Now before your young whipper snapper, of a preacher goes too much farther I need to tell you a joke I heard.

What is up with how we talk about aging.

You turn 60 like some piece of fruit going bad, you turn.

Then you made to 70, like it is the end of a marathon race you could barely cross the line.

Then you reach 80, a little better.

Then 90, is like being 3...we celebrate it and you can talk about it as a an accomplishment.

And 100, well I have never seen such well planned parties.

And I have good news for everyone. The World Health Organization who monitors age closely, released new stats recently that say:

- 0-17 years old: underage
- 18-65 years old: youth/young people
- 66-79 years old: middle-aged
- 80-99 years old: elderly/senior
- 100+ years old: long-lived elderly²

² <https://en.brilio.net/news/65-years-old-is-still-young-65-years-old-is-still-young-1601205.html#>

The average life expectancy of women will be 100 by 2057 and men as usual we figure it out not soon after that. This shifts the role of how we teach people to live, and as Christians how we help people to understand abundant living, including their spiritual life. If people are living longer, our work becomes about health-span, not just length of life care. How can we work to help our communities and the people in them healthier for the entirety of their lives.

I was teaching a new member class at my previous church in Helena. During the class the people introduced themselves, and one woman said this, "I know you all won't notice me at first, because I am not who you want in your church pew." You could see her face stern, and knowledgeable about what she was saying. We asked what she meant and she said, "Churches today want more young people, but when a new older face walks in they act like it is not a big deal."

Jesus calls us to help everyone, of every-age, everywhere, everyday with their demons, to be people who share love and to equip people who follow Christ to bring abundant life to everyone, no matter what their age.

I will say it now and I will say it many more times while I am your pastor, the church is one of the last places in our society for true intergenerational sharing, and a chance for all ages to work together. Our workplaces segregate, our institutions segregate by age, but the church can work to change this.

To start our Aging WeLL program we have partnered with Highgate Senior Living across the street, later we will partner with other people who have gained wisdom in aging well. When I toured Highgate, I discovered a roundabout. Inside their facility which focuses on the healthspan and life every resident, they have a memory care unit. In the unit there is a hallway that connects in a loop. All good memory

care units have these, what is so amazing is there are stops on the roundabout. 1 for people to remember holding babies as they go through the stages of their disease sometimes reverting to a time of being a parent helps them to cope, another station to practice sewing, another to put on shoes or sports equipment like their first home, another a workbench to build things, and another to receive massage therapy, or other touch treatments to overcome the neuropathy that contributes to dementia. They can also keep pets to give them comfort.

In the middle of their roundabout is a courtyard where they can go to check the mail, sometimes multiple times a day it is checked. However, what these stops on the roundabout do is allow people to remember deeply the times they loved in their lives, and to receive relief from the effects of their disease. Megan, who gave me the tour, said, "Sometimes it is disconcerting for families to see their love ones revert into past memories and states, but giving them an avenue to explore those times clearly brings the people here a sense of peace."

Friends, Shiloh, we are being called to connect with people as they pass through roundabouts. To help them with their demons, their diseases, and to offer them abundant life. We are being called to equip people as Christian warriors, not to do combat with violence, but to offer peace, hope, love and joy to everyone, of every-age, everyday, and everywhere.

As you go from this place today I invite you to join us after 10:15 worship for our Aging WeLL program on long term care insurance and VA benefits, or join us at Grace UMC on Tuesday night to learn more about dementia. Please pray that we continue to find ways to support our neighbors, friends and members in their roundabouts, through their demons, and to support them in abundant health living. And if you are interested in supporting this ministry with your leadership, I am

seeking to form a team for this important work who feel a nudge to support it.

As we depart from this place today, may we feel equipped with the power of the song we close worship with each week, with Shalom...peace. Trusting that God is calling us to go to Shiloh and from Shiloh to carry a sword of Shalom while wearing a new kind of armor, and shoes to carry us on the journey.

Shalom my friends.