

Sermon Series: As for You  
Ephesians 1:15-23  
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Boone UMC

Well, here we are again. Another difficult, trying week for our nation, that this time came close to home. For six years the buildings, and streets, and sites and sounds were very close to us. Kim worked in Charlotte. We lived about 20 minutes from uptown. I have friends who live and serve there now. It is a great community and a great city with wonderful people. But it has been a hard week for Charlotte.

It's been a hard and trying week for law enforcement; the majority of whom are hardworking dedicated men and women who want to make their communities a better place and who risk their lives to keep us safe. A hard week for elected officials who maybe haven't stood quite as tall as we might like. Another painful, difficult heartbreaking week for our African American brothers and sisters for whom, make no mistake about it, racism and prejudice and bigotry are very real. It has been a hard week. I have a friend who wrote a piece about the mental and emotional exhaustion that our nation is experiencing. How event after event weighs on the collective psyche.

We have real problems friends. Whatever the cause, and whoever is to blame we should all be deeply troubled. Our nation is not well. And the events we have seen unfold before us this week, and which have sadly repeated themselves all too often over the past few years, are complex. Too often, they are oversimplified by the media, and certainly by the candidates seeking the privilege of helping us address them. There are no easy answers. There is no quick fix. We didn't get here overnight. The way forward to a better place requires honesty, a real commitment to the truth. It requires confession, an owning up to the ways we all are complicit in making the world the way it is. The way forward to a place that more closely resembles the Kingdom of God on earth requires sacrifice and a willingness to seek the good of our neighbor even when it gets in the way of our own agendas. It demands that if we are in positions of power and influence that we speak up for those who struggle to speak for themselves. I'm not casting blame or not making excuses; there is no political agenda here at all. I'm simply suggesting that given the mess we are in, the people of God, the body of Christ must be about the work of reconciliation, because we bear the name of the One in whom God is reconciling all things in heaven and on earth. It has been a difficult week and I wanted to tell you a little about our wonderful trip to Ireland and then say a word or two about Paul and go home and enjoy a beautiful Sunday afternoon. Maybe this isn't what you came to hear. We need to tell the truth because only the truth will set us free.

I have a friend who this week likened the struggles we are facing to the woman in the gospel of Luke who came to Jesus seeking healing because she had suffered from hemorrhages for 12 years. She knew that if she could just touch him, just touch the hem of his garment, that there was power to heal, to make her whole.

Jonathan says we've been suffering from an issue of blood for a long time and none of the usual remedies are working. We are sick, we are a sick and dying people. Sin is a disease that plagues

the soul that robs us of life. It affects us to the very marrow of our bones. It's a disease that's manifest in the sick and ugly ways we treat each other, and talk about one another, and demonize and dehumanize those who aren't like us, and lie and tell half truths, and put ourselves first instead of loving all our neighbors the way Christ has loved us. Sin is a plague on the soul of humanity and it's killing us, and it's been killing us right from the beginning when we thought we knew more than God. If we think it doesn't affect us, that we're basically ok, that this is somebody else's problem, then Scripture is clear; we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8) But she knew that if she could just be near Jesus there was power in him to heal and make whole.

Now I am a United Methodist in part because United Methodists have always had a love of learning, and have always valued and emphasized study and engaging God and the world with our minds. But knowledge alone is not enough. The truth is no amount of sensitivity training, or education, or knowledge, or political maneuvering is going to be enough, as important as those things are, and we ought to exhaust all of those possibilities, they help with the symptoms of the problem, they are part of the solution. Alone they won't cure our disease. Alone they cannot make us well. The problem is much deeper than that. It is a matter not only of the head but also of the heart. That requires a different remedy, a different prescription. Which brings me to Paul and finally to Ephesians. Let me redirect our attention to the good news in the midst of a difficult week. I want to read a brief section of this morning's letter again and invite you to listen not just with your mind but with your heart. Hear the word of the Lord.

*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to you. I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see what is the hope of God's call for you, what is the richness of God's glorious inheritance given to you, and what is the overwhelming greatness of God's power that is working among us. The very same power that raised Christ from the dead.*

Paul prayed for the Church in the midst of a world, not unlike our own, a world of terrible violence, and poverty, and oppression, and injustice. Paul prayed that the Church would not lose heart or lose sight of what had been given to them. The letter encourages the people of God to remember the great gifts at their disposal - hope, an inheritance of life, and the power of God that raises the dead. You know maybe this week has depressed you, or made you feel powerless, or dampened your hope, or angered you, or even shaken your faith. Ephesians has a word for us, good news for a broken humanity. In Christ Jesus, in the one who has been seated at the right hand of God, in the one who has dominion over all authority, in the one who is Lord of the Church, in the crucified and risen Messiah there is power, and healing, and hope, and life. Which is why she knew that if she could just touch the hem of his garment, just cling to him for a moment, that she would be healed and made well. Friends the problem with us is that we're addicted, we cling to the wrong things, we look for our identity in the wrong places - in our anger, our divisions, our differences, our race, our wealth, our careers, our political party - leaning on those may alleviate the symptoms of our disease for a while but in the end they don't make us well. And all the while Paul says, at work in you is the same power that raised Christ from the dead.

Paul knew that we are prone to forget who we are, that we will focus on things like gentile or Jew, natural born or immigrant, police or protestor, black or white, rich or poor, and that we will forget our true identity. So Paul wrote a letter to Christ's followers in Ephesus encouraging them to remember who they are, to cling to that truth as if their lives depended upon it because they do. As a matter of fact the life of the world depends upon it. As for you, Ephesians says, you, we are called to be different, to be holy, to be living reminders that the healing of our sin, of our divisions, of our violence, of our prejudice, of our fear and hatred, that our healing is found in clinging to Jesus. Which also means that the Church is a means by which the risen Lord is present and made manifest. The Church is the body of Christ given for others. God is saving and healing the world through the Church and we, Christ's followers, are called to make the cause of God manifest in the world. We are to be a foretaste of God's good future, of God's longing and desire to heal us and set us free (Verhey and Harvard, 63) Not because of who we are, but because the same power that raised Christ from the dead has been given to us. The truth of the matter is, for us and our nation and our world to be healed we don't need a little polishing around the edges, a few tweaks here and there, we need literally to be raised from the dead.

How different would our lives be if we took this seriously? How different would our conversations, our planning, our giving, our serving, our praying, our worship, how different would we be if we truly believed this and lived into it and out of it? How different might we be if we took God seriously at God's Word. I pray that you can see it, the letter says, with the eyes of your heart, the hope of God's call for you, the richness of God's glorious inheritance given to you, and the overwhelming greatness of God's power that is working within you. We lack nothing friends. Right now, because of the resurrection power of God that was poured out upon us, we can be hope, and life, and healing for a world crying out for redemption.

Gathering for worship, and affirming this truth with our lips, and then returning to life as usual is not enough. We are called to allow it to permeate our lives and to bear fruit within us.

After all, the call to follow Christ is, as Bonhoeffer says, a call to come and die. It's not an invitation to be a little better, but a call to deep and lasting transformation. It's an invitation to be raised from the dead and to become like Jesus. To love in a world of hate, to forgive in a world of settling the score, to tell the truth in a world of lies, and in a world addicted to violence to be makers of peace. In a word, to be a people who practice resurrection, who live as Easter people, citizens of an alternative Kingdom because the power that raised Jesus from the dead is in us.

So where might we begin to offer hope, and healing, and life to the world in the name of Christ? What is one alternative practice we can commit to that might point the world in the direction of the Kingdom of our Lord? In our first Monday evening Service which we held a few weeks ago (the next one is October 3<sup>rd</sup> at 6:00pm in the Chapel) I talked about the creative power of God's word. How in the beginning God speaks into the chaos and brings forth beauty, and goodness, and order, and life.

What might it mean for the followers of Jesus to be a people who are careful with our words? You see words create worlds. And by our words we can shape a world of truth or a world of lies

in which the narrative suits us and our side. So what if we deliberately and intentionally seek to use our words to shape a world of truth, to build up rather than to tear down? What if we refuse to gossip, refuse to pass along the story that we don't really know to be true, or that belittles a neighbor? What if we humbly and gently correct the lies that abound? What if we pause and think before we share that post that supports my point but may harm my neighbor? What if we stop laughing at the off color remark? What if we listen before we speak or spend some time in conversation with someone not like us? What if we commit to only saying those things that honor God and glorify Christ Jesus God's Son? What if over time we began to develop an accent so that when others hear us they would say, "You know, they sound kind of like Jesus." What if by the power of the Holy Spirit our words healed the sick, and raised the dead, and brought heaven on earth? It might just make for a better week.