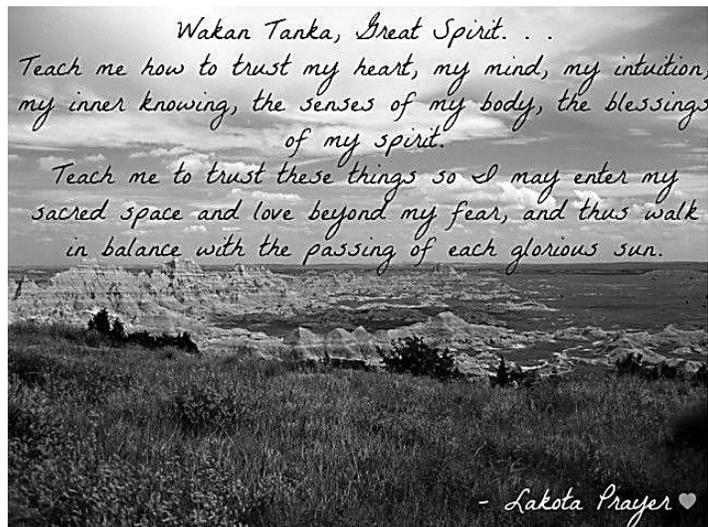


BUILT FOR STRENGTH OF SPIRIT



Scripture:

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

⁵³When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Ephesians 2:13-22

¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



BUILT FOR STRENGTH OF SPIRIT

As I was pondering how Paul was inspiring the church community members in Ephesus to consider themselves to be built on the foundation of those who had come before them, I thought of my admiration for people of the “Greatest Generation.” They survived the Great Depression, World War II and they know hardship yet now have a strength in spirit. The characteristics of those who are in the greatest generation are humbleness, a sense of personal responsibility for their lives, a strong work ethic, saving, being thrifty, faithfulness and commitment to jobs, family and church. These are all strengths of spirit that Paul was talking about as well, having the ability to persevere in spite of struggles in life.

This passage in Ephesians is fascinating! Paul is speaking in a letter to a community of Gentiles within the church in Ephesus. I saw Ephesus. It was amazing how much of the original temple grounds there were restored. What a thrill to know that where I placed my feet, Paul had also placed his somewhere near there, too. I felt like a time traveler.

THE CHURCH IN EPHEBUS

This letter to the church in Ephesus was an effort to help them understand their identity as Christians. Ephesus is in what we now know as Turkey, far from Jerusalem. So it would be easy to lose your identity and forget where you came from so to speak. Paul is helping the Ephesians understand God’s plan for their church community, and their connection still to Israel. But his main emphasis here in the beginning of the letter is to see that life within the church is to reflect God’s purpose in Christ. To put it simply, the church is a reflection of Christ to the world.

So let’s see what each line meant to Paul and the Ephesians in this pericope (section of verses). It starts out, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

The Ephesians are no longer strangers to the faith, but they now understand the sacrifice Jesus made for them and for all people.

“For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the

dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” Don’t you just love that phrase, “For he is our peace...”

THE JEWISH AND THE GENTILES

There was still competition between those originally Jewish like Jesus and the gentiles. Remember the gentiles were thought of as dogs who could just get the crumbs leftover of Christianity at one time. But Jesus included them in community equally with the Jews.

“He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” The Jews had many laws and commands. So for Jesus to abolish the laws, ordinances, and commandments to bring unity to the people, both sides had to be humbled. And that is the key to bringing about peace and reconciliation. There was no room for hostility on the cross. The gentile Ephesians must know that Christ died on the cross for them as well as for the Jews, just the same as if they were one body. That is the way to get to know someone from another group. Think of yourself as that person going through the joys and the struggles they have to endure.

“So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.”
Here, Paul reassures the Ephesians that they have the same access to God that the people near Jerusalem enjoy even though they are six-hundred sixteen miles apart. And so do we, living seven-thousand-five-hundred miles from Jerusalem.

Then this section concludes with: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation

of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

MEMBERS OF THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

Why was it so important to encourage these people to see themselves as members of the household of God, standing on a foundation built for them by apostles and prophets with Christ as their cornerstone?

Why is it important for us to not feel so far from this today?

It is easy to lose our identity and perspective as Christ followers. There is so much competing for our time and energy. And there was lots competing for theirs in those days as well. Plus the threat of death was always breathing down their necks for worshiping in a different way from the main stream at that time.

In Ephesus there was a huge Greek influence. The people were still worshipping the Greek gods and sacrificing animals in pagan religious ceremonies. Roman soldiers would imprison people who didn't follow the Roman empire's way of doing things. Anything that looked as if it was disruptive to the Romans would be silenced. This was a scary time for the church in Ephesus and for all the early Christian churches struggling to survive.

(The tour group on my trip to Turkey visited the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3.)

So Paul's letter is trying to build up their strength of Spirit. He is giving them inspiration and motivation to make them resilient enough to deal with all the challenges to their faith that will come along in their lives.

According to Will Durant in Wikipedia, the Christian Church prevailed over paganism because it offered a much more attractive doctrine and because the church leaders addressed human needs better than their rivals.

But when Paul is writing this letter, the Ephesians don't know that they would eventually prevail, so he had to reassure them and help build up their strength for a tough future. Thankfully the Ephesians listened to him and they survived in the midst of a huge pagan influence in Turkey.

And this still applies to us today. The part where he says: “in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

That's us and our church! We are built together spiritually, that is what we are to strive for. To be spiritually together with Christ and to make our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit, dwelling places for God.

A HOLY TEMPLE

Have you ever awakened and looked in the mirror and considered that there is a holy temple and a dwelling place for God looking back at you? It has two eyes and a nose and a mouth and maybe some hair on its head.

You are a temple of the Holy Spirit as it says in 1st Corinthians 3:16 “Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?” Ponder that for a moment. Embrace your holy temple; hug yourself. How does your temple feel today?

Your temple is unique and precious. And yet we are all called to reflect Jesus to the world with our temples, both the solid church structures and the spiritual body structures.

How does our church temple structure reflect Jesus to the world?

I am so proud of the way this church welcomes and includes all and seeks out the poor, the lonely and the lost and embraces them in the faith. That is what Jesus would do. We feed people as Jesus did; we show compassion when others judge. We provide a sanctuary for healing and wholeness, and we do it pretty well. The greatest generation does this very well, and next Sunday we will have a couple speak to us who are examples of this strength of spirit.

Now how do you show these things with your unique temples? Every day does your temple go out and try to do something for the poor, the lost, or the broken-hearted? Do you feed hungry people, heal, and love the least of

these in the world? It is not hard. You just need to ask and our church will get you hooked up with a connection to serve the least of these in Santa Rosa.

CHRIST THE CORNERSTONE

So how is Christ the cornerstone of our church today? Where do we see the reflection of Jesus going out to the community? Call out some ways we show Jesus to those who don't know him. (Members of the congregation called out many areas where Church of the Roses and its members provide help.)

When we are true imitators or reflectors of Jesus, we also reflect regular worship here in the church, regular prayer, accept leadership roles, and we challenge corrupt practices. Besides all the things already said, we must include challenging racism, exclusivity, discrimination, and corporate greed in the world as well, because that is what Jesus would have us do as his church on earth. John Bell, in his book *Ten Things They Never Told Me About Jesus*, said, "His miracles in religious precincts and his challenge to corrupt practices were indicative of an understanding of faith in which the whole of our being – spiritual, moral, intellectual, economic, has to be laid open to the gracious amendment of God. Anything less is partial faith for disintegrated people."

Christ broke down the dividing walls and placed within himself a new humanity. You are the offspring of that new humanity whose purpose is to continue the work of reconciliation and promote justice for all.

Let's close with a prayer as an example of how your temple can reflect Jesus to the world. Please pray for refugees, the displaced souls around the world.

Almighty and merciful God, whose Son became a refugee and had no place to call his own, look with mercy on those who today are fleeing from danger, homeless and hungry. Bless those who work to bring them relief; inspire generosity and compassion in all our hearts; and guide the nations of the world towards that day when all will rejoice in your kingdom of justice and of peace.

God of love, you made us all your children; we praise You and thank You. Fill us with a sense of justice. Help us in your work, to take the side of the lowly, to defend the newcomer. Help us now to befriend the friendless, protect the weak children, and work for the rights of all. Lord, on our journey home, bring us together in peace, in justice, and in love, God, we pray for all your people and for your church; we pray that you might strengthen us and sustain us with your Spirit, your mercy and your grace; allow us to heed your call to welcome the stranger in our midst; open our minds that we learn from and be challenged by difference; open our hearts that we might act in compassionate service towards the other. Amen



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