

“A Different Kind of Strength”

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, June 24, 2018

I Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23

Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle; they were gathered at Socoh, which belongs to Judah, and encamped between Socoh and Azekah, in Ephes-dammim. And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was sixcubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armoured with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him. He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, 'Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us.' And the Philistine said, 'Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together.' When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

Now Saul, and they, and all the men of Israel, were in the valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. David rose early in the morning, left someone in charge of the sheep, took the provisions, and went as Jesse had commanded him. He came to the encampment as the army was going forth to the battle line, shouting the war cry. Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers. As he talked with them, the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines, and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him.

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

Will you pray with me? Holy God, you offer us your Word to challenge, to inspire, to comfort. To help us to grow in Faith. And so, as we wrestle with your Word this day, may your Spirit move among us and be with us. Amen. So the Tuesday morning book group just finished discussing Ken Bailey's book, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes*, a book about the ministry of Paul in Corinth. Ken Bailey was a Presbyterian pastor who lived in the Middle East for 40 years and taught in a number of institutions. And he also wrote many books about the Scripture. What I love about his work is his in-depth understanding of life in the Middle East. He's able to explain the nuances of the stories behind the Scripture readings. The kind of things that aren't obvious to those of us who have never lived there. Now, the book isn't exactly summer reading. Each section opens with rhetorical criticism. An analysis of the verses and a chapter and segments using words like couplets, cameos, and other phrases. After that, he offers a commentary on each passage. So I'll be honest and admit to you I probably only read half the book, as did the rest of the class, because we skimmed that literal dissection of the passages, but we really spent time with the commentary. And what

he shared was very insightful and thoughtful. And I think for all of us in the class, we felt like we had come to a newer and deeper understanding and appreciation for the Apostle Paul.

So I'll admit, I used to think of Paul was an uptight kind of guy. Being with him would like be talking to an ex-smoker talking about giving up smoking in the midst of a smoky bar [laughter]. That's my analogy. By that, I mean he's always conveyed as someone who is very dogmatic and legalistic in his approach. Always, it's felt as though seeking to criticize and it would make sense. He's a Pharisee. He's well-trained. He knows the Scriptures and he knew them well. And in the early days of the church, he was really upset with those who had been converted to Christianity and was often trying to persecute them. But as we know, one day on the road to Damascus something changed. He heard the voice of Jesus and saw a great light and fell to the ground literally blinded by that light. And he heard Jesus saying to him with a profound question, "Saul, why do you persecute me?" He's blind now, so he needs help. So Jesus appeared in a vision to Ananias in Damascus and told him to go help Paul. Now, if we were there with Ananias, I'm sure he said to someone next to him, "Are you kidding me? Do you know what he's been doing to the rest of us?" But Jesus' words were convincing. And so, he went and found Saul, who was now Paul and he nursed him back to health. It was a very profound moment. He was deeply changed by the event and not only because of his name. I think his world was turned upside down and inside out. And he indeed became a new creation. He experienced the Grace and love of God in a new and profound way. He felt deep regret for his times of persecution. And he felt a calling to preach throughout the Mediterranean to bring the good news of Jesus Christ.

And so, one of the places he did go to was Corinth. It's a busy city. It was slowly rebuilding after being burned to the ground by enemies about a century before. It was a crossroads for trade and athletic events. There were many temples to various gods and many temple prostitutes. But Paul found those there who were listening or yearning for the Word of Jesus Christ. And he developed a profound relationship with the people there. And even when he went and moved on, he kept in touch through his letters. He was a very knowledgeable man. He could speak to Jews and new Christians, to Greeks and Romans, and Hebrews and pagans, and long-time Jews. He understood that he had an incredibly cosmopolitan audience. And though he may have left town, the people of Corinth in the church were not out of his mind. He thought about them a lot. And he got messages about what was going on, both the good and the bad. And so, while he wrote them words and greetings of support and encouragement, he also called them out on their behavior. And he challenged them and talked to them about wrongdoings. But Bailey shows us that he did that so carefully. He always tempered it with love. I felt like I was reading a shepherd talk about their flock. He was so willing to gather up the lost, and the lonely, and the confused, and the questioning. And love ran through his words like a flowing river.

Indeed, many of us know Corinthians 13, probably best of many Scriptures with the family words "Love is patient and kind. It is not envious or boastful". But love is not just found in that chapter 13. The entire letter is filled with that theme of love woven in and out to the Corinthians. He truly believed that Faith, hope, and love abide. And that the greatest of these is love. I understand in a much deeper way that Paul was a powerful man, not because he was dogmatic, but because he was a diplomat. A true ambassador-- somebody able to see the issues from more perspectives than his own. And he approached matters of concern with compassion and wisdom. You remember how he handled the issue of eating meats from idols. He doesn't believe in idols so the meat is fine to eat, as far as he is concerned. But he knows these non-Jews new to the Faith, they don't understand that. They find it hard, literally and theologically, to swallow. So he says, "Do the compassionate thing. Give up this food when you eat with them out of consideration for their discomfort." Paul seeks to bring people together even in the midst of their differences. He preaches unity, but he does not preach uniformity. He accepts diversity, aware that every person brings a perspective from their own life experience. It doesn't mean he tolerates anything and everything. But it does mean that he knows that this church is full of so many different kinds of people who have led very different lives. And he wants to show them how to come together.

I think the passage today brings us to his understanding of how Faith can transform us, and shape us, and guide us. When we are in Christ, we do indeed, just like Stella, become a new creation. We are to consider the world differently with the mind of Christ. Paul wrote, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view. Even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view. We don't know him that way anymore. We do not fixate on different nationalities or races, or wealth or poverty, or looks or dress. We are called to view each person as Christ did. As an individual made in the image of God. And in so doing, we become ambassadors, not for a country, but for Jesus Christ. We don't focus only on differences. We focus on what makes us one." His words are about the power and importance of reconciliation. And that when we are one in Christ, the Spirit moves among us. Calling us, and challenging us, and imploring us to work to reconcile with one another.

The passage goes on to talk about-- in which Paul talks about his sense of calling in ministry. He has not had an easy time of it. He's been arrested and gone through hardships, and conflicts, and calamities, sleepless nights, and hunger. But he persevered. He said, not because he thinks he's so amazing, but because he depended on the power of God for knowledge, patience, kindness, genuine love, and truthful speech. Paul's reliance on God leads him through the face of all the challenges he meets. And he trusts that no matter how others criticize him, he is simply trying to be faithful. And that is what he implores us to do. Share the Faith with love. Paul was not an evangelist who preached with fear and threats, but genuine love. Sharing the Faith was offered as an invitation. Not as a weapon to say, "You better believe or else." Fears and threats are not a way to come to deep and trusting believing. Genuine love is what does that. Paul calls the Corinthians and us to see beyond what we normally see from a human point of view. To let go of the fears and anxieties that fill us with anger or animosity. Or the threats of change. Or the fear of those who are different. Paul weaves love through all things. Through the law, through justice, through challenge and time of reconciliation. He wants them to stand on a Faith that is grounded in love. And as I thought about this, I realized the power of Paul to bring the Faith among so many was because of compassion and his genuine love. He lived like a shepherd.

And not long ago, I saw a video that showed this kind of love in action. It was of Pope Francis. And I was reminded that above all he is a pastor, a shepherd, a person who lives by genuine love. And so, I learned from the video that it's his custom to go to the nearby local parish from time to time, and sit and sort of have a give and take audience with the people from the area. And we saw a young boy looking at the Pope. And he wants to speak and he is called to come up. And at first, he moves towards the microphone and then he freezes. And he says, "I can't do it." He approaches again and then he backs away. And you can see tears in his eyes. And one of the priests try to gently encourage him to go forward and so did his classmates. And finally, Francis called, "What is his name?" "Emmanuel." and Francis said, "Come to me, Emmanuel. Come and whisper it in my ear." And the boy mustered the courage to approach the Pope. And he climbed on the stage and he whispered in his ear for some time. And when he was done, he looked exhausted. And Francis embraced him and the child began to weep, and their heads touched. And the Pope held the boy in his arms while he cried. And then, they spoke again before Emmanuel returned to his seat. And the Pope turned to the audience and said, "Emmanuel has given me permission to share the conversation." He said to me, "A little while ago, my father passed away. My father wasn't a believer. But he had all his children baptized and he had a good heart. He was a good man. Is my dad in heaven?" Francis said, "What a beautiful thing. A little boy says of his father. 'He was a good man.'"

He gave a beautiful testimony for his children to say, "He was a good man." "This boy inherited the strength of his father and a willingness to cry before all of us. If that man was capable of raising children like this child, it's true. He was a good man. God is the one who decides who goes to Heaven", he said, "But how does God's heart respond to this? With a father's heart. He has the heart of a father." And then, Francis looked out at all of them there and said, "Does God abandon his children when they are good? Do you think that God would be capable of leaving him with a dad who was a non-believer?" Francis asked the

children if they thought that God would abandon a father like Emmanuel's who was a good man. And they said, "No! God would not." "There, Emmanuel, that is the answer. It is easier being a believer and baptizing than a non-believer and having your children baptized. Surely, this pleased God. Thank you for your courage, Emmanuel."

I was struck by so many things in that moment. The compassion of a shepherd holding one of his worried and anxious sheep. A man of great power reaching out to hold a weeping child and truly listen to his story. It did not escape my attention that his name is Emmanuel--God with us. God was with him in that moment. In the words of love. In the holding of a weeping child and the crowd who was there to support him. In the whispers of the shepherd to a flock. A face of compassion and hope, not judgement. Francis found another way, the best way, the way of love. The way of love. Paul said, "neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.