

First Christian Church

(Disciples of Christ)
210 North Fifth Street
Ponca City, Oklahoma

The 12th Sunday after Pentecost
August 23, 2009

1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84;
Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69
the Rev. Larry B Metzger, pastor



Today's gospel reading is a disturbing reading. There were those who turned away from Jesus, who left before the Christ would return. It is a text that is used by doomsday folk to talk about the end of time. And because it is 6:66 it is seen as a Armageddon type scripture; 666 being the number of the Antichrist. People forget that scripture did not originally have numbers. It was added to help people locate scripture. We can easily make numbers be what we want them to be.

There is this true story of a football player who graduated from college, and the coach asked him if he would like to come on staff and be a scout and try to find other good football players. He said, "Sure coach, what kind of a player are you looking for?"

He said, "Well, there's a kind of guy that when you knock him down he just stays down." He said, "We don't want him do we, coach?" The coach said, "No, we don't want him. But then there's the kind of guy that when you knock him down, he gets up. But if you knock him down the second time he just stays down." The man said, "We don't want him either do we coach?" The coach said, "No, we don't want him either."

He said, "But there's the kind of guy that when you knock him down he gets up; you knock him down and he gets up; you knock him down again and he just keeps getting up." The man said, "Now that's the guy we want, right coach?" The coach said, "No, we don't want him either. What I want you to do is find the guy who's knocking all these other guys down, that's the guy I want."

Paul says you got to ready. You have to be ready to resist those who would knock you down. When you are on the front line that is what you would be facing.

Have you ever been on the front line? Thankfully, most of us have never had to fight in an actual war. But every day of our lives we are engaged in a kind of war. It is a war of the spirit – a war of hope versus despair, love versus hatred, right living versus wrong living. We are on the front line and sometimes things look tough.

Paul knew what it was like to be on the front line. Indeed, he was under arrest when he wrote to the believers at Ephesus. His own words were that he was an “ambassador in chains.” He says that he was shipwrecked, stoned, beaten and left for dead all because he was preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. And yet, in spite of all this, he writes a message to the Ephesians that is upbeat and positive.

Jesus faced a kind of war when he was teaching. His message was difficult. It tended to offend people. In today’s reading, Jesus is surrounded by his disciples. His disciples are more than the 12. Disciples are those who followed and those who were sent out. Remember when Jesus sent out 144 to teach and heal?

Many of the disciples found his teaching to be a hard thing. It was so difficult and offensive; they could not continue to be counted as disciples.

To believe in the works of God as found in Jesus requires great faith. These are things that cannot be proved or illustrated in a text book. Much of what Jesus taught appeared to be against the traditions of the Jewish faith.

Like so many things, we are ready to hear the flaws in the thinking of our enemies or how they need to change. We follow the ones who speak our language when it comes to being against what we are against, or for those issues we are for. But if the teacher or politician speaks in opposition to our beliefs or preferences, then we become disenchanted with the teacher.

It is much easier to think about hard ideas; ideas posing difficult questions like, “What is God asking me to do or think that seems unthinkable or undoable?” If we think about it then we don’t have to actually do things like helping the poor or deal with language issues.

We should be armed with the truth. But the truth is sometimes hard for us to take. Many students only want to be taught what they believe. They are not really interested in being exposed to new approaches except for the sport of refuting them. How many

disciples do you think were honestly interested in learning about God through Jesus? I cannot help but believe a few of them had a bone to pick with Judaism or the Romans and saw Jesus as the way to stand up to them.

Perhaps they were out to find meaning for their lives. Some of them probably could not keep a job or were not fulfilled in their line of work. They could have gone to school or followed Jesus. School may have been too demanding for some and following Jesus was seen as a shortcut. And I am sure there had to be at least one who became a disciple because mother or dad said not to do it.

He turns to the twelve and Simon Peter responds. The twelve, or at least the eleven do believe in the words of Christ. The twelfth, Judas did not have enough faith to carry him through.

What the 12 have that others do not is the gift of the spirit. There cannot be proof sufficient for the logical mind. It is the spirit that enables the 12 disciples to know the truth of Christ.

Perhaps you can hear a note of sadness when Jesus said, “Do you also wish to go away? (v. 67)” He knew many would not be able to go the long haul, but even with that knowledge, it hurts to be rejected. We may be able to predict with absolute accuracy the response of our children, bracing ourselves against disappointment.

However, it does not seem to lessen the pain when a child fails to carry through with their responsibility.

This scripture helps us to see that Jesus knew pain and suffering. His relationships with others knew the same kinds of stress and conflict as in our daily living.

Paul reminds us we need strength to face the battle. The strength is found in God. Certainly, it was the strength of God that sustained and carried Jesus. This strength comes to us gradually. It does not just become a part of us when we elect to follow Christ. It builds as our faith builds.

Those of us who have been involved in education all our lives know that we do not suddenly become familiar with the truth of faith. It is built upon all our faith experiences.

In the Epistle passage, the “wiles of the devil” suggests the faithful need protection. Believers must be prepared to defend

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themselves. In the gospel lesson, we find that unbelief is real. Twice it is mentioned in this passage. Unbelief takes over when we have not prepared and armed ourselves.

Paul uses the terms of battle because the people of the time knew what it was to be occupied by a foreign government. The gear worn by the soldier was all too familiar. By being properly protected and prepared, one would have a better chance to be victorious.

Poet Maya Angelou recalls the struggles of her grandmother living through the great depression. She remembers a lot of things about her grandmother: her wisdom, her stature. But it was her grandmother's faith that Maya remembers most. Claspng her hands behind her back her grandmother would look up into the distant sky and say, "I will step out on the word of God."

The great depression was a difficult time for everyone, but "especially so for a single black woman in the South tending her crippled son and two grandchildren." But when faced with mountainous burdens, Maya's grandmother would face the sky and say, "I will step out on the word of God."

"She would look up as if she could will herself into the heavens," Maya writes. And because of her grandmother, Maya Angelou grew up knowing that the word of God had power. And now, today, whenever she experiences the injustices of this world, Maya remembers the great faith of her grandmother.

God gives us spiritual armor to protect us from the evil we face daily: truth, righteousness, the willingness to speak up for Christ as we witness, and, most importantly, faith.

And it is all accessible through the Word of God. The Bible we read from this morning is the same Bible that opens us to God's holy word.

