

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
The Rev. George Arceneaux
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
August 22, 2021
Ephesians 6:10-20

I spent a lot of time this week trying to figure out how to preach this sermon. I've had a sense what the readings were calling me to preach about, which I'll say up front. This is a sermon about trying to see our beliefs and figure out which are hurtful and false what are life-giving and true. Because I think that Paul in his letter to the Ephesians is encouraging us towards that spirit which Jesus mentions in our Gospel that gives life as Paul encourages us to don the armor of God and stand against the evil in our lives.

I hope you'll be willing to bear some vulnerability and I'm somewhat nervous to preach my own experience, but I hope in doing so it may spur you to think of our own story and beliefs. Thinking about Paul's words about encountering evil, I believe we each encounter hurtful and false beliefs which we adopt over the course of our lives, I'm certain I have at the very least. Even though I have, honestly, found his metaphors a smidge cheesy, I really think that belt of truth and breastplate of righteousness are so important to living a more loving and good life and that we need such ideals as Paul speaks of to hold against those hurtful beliefs and stories we start to learn as we live.

Again I note that I know I started to believe things that are hurtful and false as I grew up in southern Louisiana, and even just saying that I suspect some of you may have some inklings to what toxic stories I grew up with. I went to private schools all my life, I've got roman numerals at the end of my name, and I'm George the fourth. So it may not surprise you that as I was growing up, I truly believed that there was a good side of town and a bad side of town. And the good side of town was predominantly white and affluent and wealthy and the bad side of town was black and brown and poor. Now I don't know that I remember thinking of those living on the bad side of town as bad themselves explicitly, I just remember being afraid of those places. And I remember being afraid of people who looked like they were from those places.

Growing up, I was incentivized to remain in those spaces which the world around me seemed to deem as "good" and to stay away from those people and those places which were frightening to me and I continued to be incentivized to stay in comfortable spaces until I was forced to encounter the people in those "bad" parts of town.

After I graduated from college in Minnesota, I was fortunate enough to work in construction with AmeriCorps in none other than my hometown in southern Louisiana, working with others to offer free home repair to those with fewer resources as a result of poverty, age, or disability. And, guess what, turns out the sort of people I was gonna work with were the same ones I had been terrified of my whole childhood.

Now I feel wary of idealizing the places I encountered, they were often towns and neighborhoods which struggled with poverty and crime, but they were places home to people. Not the dehumanized figures I had come to fear because of the narratives I carried in my head, they were

people, as complex and so often kind as could be. They were people like a fella named Henry whose home had been destroyed by squatters, who had an armadillo living in his bathroom who slept on a couch in the living room because there were holes in the exterior of his house and who every day thought he had nothing would walk to the gas station a mile and a half away to get us payday bars because he couldn't imagine not welcoming guests in his home. They were people like a woman named Polly who cooked for the crew just about every day as she managed a horde of kids running around her house. Such people tore down those pernicious, false stories and beliefs I had learned over the course of my life. They helped disabuse me of my fears and showed me, using Paul's language, the heavenly nature of those places I had avoided.

And again, I bring up my own experience because I believe it is not unique. Because our world still abounds in those toxic and terrible narratives which inhibit our love for one another and which promulgate human suffering. Sexism and racism, homophobia, transphobia, fat-phobia, the seemingly infinite list of fearful narratives which stigmatize ways of just trying to be human continue to hurt and kill, to depress and dehumanize. And such narratives not only affect how we perceive or dehumanize others, but so too infect how we see ourselves. We may condemn ourselves as failing to be successful enough or good enough that our bodies do not fit what they "should" be or we may be led to think our passions irrelevant or meaningless. And I wonder what false narratives hold sway over you.

Yet as I wonder about what beliefs you may hold, I do hold to one which I think is true, which I think is spoken to in the readings: that we are called to stand against those beliefs that prevent us from loving. The good news we get from Paul and Jesus in thank heavens the final instance of the bread of life discourse, we're moving on to Mark next week, is that the toxic narratives we encounter do not hold ultimate sway over us. Because, yeah, we can put on the whole armor of God, we can as Jesus says embody that spirit which gives life and seek the truth that we are each infinitely valuable and loved by God and worthy of love. We can look for, define and see the narratives which sway us towards dehumanizing others or ourselves, and we can work to dismantle those systems in our world, our neighborhoods, and communities in ourselves which purvey such dehumanizing beliefs. We can embody that so simple truth which I've taken so much shoe leather to get to this morning that we are called to JUST LOVE PEOPLE.

So I hope that we may look to our lives, and look for those heavenly places which may have been ignored because of the untruths we have learned. May we look to act righteously and seek the truth of the goodness within ourselves and those around us. Amen.