**Flesh, Blood, Love and Light**

A sermon offered by the Rev. Paul Belz-Templeman on August 25, 2024

Based on Ephesians 6:10-18

I don’t know about you, but I for one am glad I made my way here this morning. My name is Paul Belz-Templeman and I belong to Southminster. You may have seen me around a few times so that phrase doesn’t have the same effect as when I say it at other churches so let me continue. I’m not a member here but I belong. How is that? Well, I’m your presbytery stated clerk, and serve the leaders of this congregation and the other 87 congregations that are gathered in this presbytery (which is what we call our regional church body) answering questions on meeting procedure and other items from the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church. I help plan presbytery meetings and take the minutes. I keep records of our 350 minister members and assist several presbytery committees. Fun fact, my spouse Liz IS a member of Southminster, she joined earlier this summer so you’ve seen us here and will continue to see us here when we aren’t visiting other congregations as part of my work for the presbytery. I asked Liz the other day, why did you choose Southminster? Her answer revealed a lot about you all and also about me. She said, “don’t you remember, Paul, you chose it!” “oh yah, I did…

Indeed I have enjoyed the warmth of this congregation and the nurturing Sunday worship. I also know many of you from your service to the Presbytery so I felt at home right from the beginning.

On behalf of the Presbytery I thank Southminster for providing so many leaders who serve at presbytery as well as for your ongoing and strong financial support. And I am grateful for your legacy of working within the Church and beyond to secure a place for the LGBTQ+ community and to lift up environmental and structural justice issues before they gained traction in the Presbytery and denomination. This all helps the presbytery live into its mission of cultivating Spirit-led collaborative ministries that embody God’s love in Jesus Christ. Cultivating Spirit-led collaborative ministries that embody God’s love in Jesus Christ. And when we use the word collaborative we mean between congregations, ecclesiastical partners, community organizations and global neighbors. It’s broad and deep reflecting our connections and potential for greater connection.

Here is one example of collaboration in the presbytery. A few weeks ago I visited the Community Presbyterian Church in Lakeside, Oregon. Lakeside is a small community on the Oregon Coast, just north of Coos Bay. The congregation has about 10 members. It’s a small congregation in a small town. A few years back they received a grant from the presbytery to convert a couple of Sunday School classrooms into a summer hostel for bikers and hikers on the Oregon Coast.

In fact, when we visited there was one cyclist who was still there after church- he was doing his laundry in the shower and laundry facility built with another grant from the presbytery and community organizations. During the colder off-season months, they use that hostel as an overnight shelter for the houseless population. They have a small pantry that they keep stocked with food and toiletries for those in the community and those passing through. Lakeside’s ministry is our ministry is your ministry as we are one Christ and Christ has brought us all together through the Holy Spirit.

Most recently I was at the Warm Springs Presbyterian Church on the Warm Springs Reservation. The Church has been without a pastor for about a year- it’s a challenging place to serve because it’s fairly remote and we are working to renovate the manse next door so a pastor can live there- the poverty rate on the reservation is 28%, double the rate in Oregon and the average household income is half what it is for the rest of Oregon. The Church has about a dozen in worship on most Sundays, they host the community food pantry and with some help from Presbyterians from across the state they held a large 150th anniversary celebration on Saturday where members of the Warm Springs tribe mixed with Presbyterians including Pastor Scott, over food and with music and storytelling.

We heard stories of the ways that Presbyterian partnerships with the boarding school left a bitter taste in the mouths of many but also of the people’s resilience in the face of adversity. The Presbytery will continue to work on the Warm Springs Reservation, and we are working to renovate the manse (that’s what Presbyterians call the house provided to a minister) we hope to raise $150,000 to renovate the manse by next summer, so that together we can continue serving the people of Warm Springs.

It wasn’t intentional, but as I wrestled with the reading selected for this Sunday from [Ephesians](https://www.bible.com/bible/2016/EPH.6.10-18.NRSV) I realized that our verses make a vital point as we all seek to live into collaborative ministry- as we collaborate church to church and church to other community organizations. But that’s not why I selected this text instead of the Gospel or Hebrew Scripture selected for this Sunday. No, reading these verses I remembered an article in this September’s Atlantic by McKay Coppins titled “The Most Revealing Moment of a Trump Rally” with the heartwarming subtitle for an English major: “A close reading of the prayers delivered before the former president speaks.”

Turns out that one of the more frequently quotes scriptures in these prayers and, I suspect, in many prayers of a particularly loud subsection of Evangelicals whether they are at a political rally or in church comes from our text in Ephesians: “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”

I was fascinated by the use of this verse in a way that seemed to flip its meaning on its head- the article points out that for many, this text about spiritual warfare which is conflated with the idea that spiritual warfare is fought in the political realm.

But wait, I want to say- it says our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against cosmic powers and spiritual forces.

Perhaps it goes back to my first year of college. Fun fact, I attended a Christian High School and then I went off to a public college, and not just any secular college, the college was named: Diablo Valley College. So there I was, from Christian High School to a college with Devil in the name- Diablo, devil. I’m playing here, it was overall a great experience and the school symbol wasn’t it Pentagram, it was a Viking, why? I’m not sure and I think I’m going to look into that next week- the Viking part, not the lack of Pentagrams on our school apparel.

Anyway, I remember in my freshman year being so frustrated with a couple of professors who were Marxists, vocally anti-Christian and somewhat lazy to boot, they wouldn’t show up to class more often than not. I was angry with the way I was being treated though in part my vocal pro-Christianity might have had just a little to do with it. And I remember reading this verse in a Bible study and having the epiphany that the professors weren’t my enemies. These verses allowed me to move beyond opposing them to reframing what was going on as something that involved forces larger than any of us. It helped me to step back rather than trying to cram my Christian agenda into the airspace of academia and work towards loving them as neighbors, listening to them and understanding that we were all in this together. The struggle wasn’t with flesh and blood humans. It was with non-human spiritual forces.

As a Freshman I understood the non-flesh and blood forces as spiritual beings with personalities, think of Demons and the Devil. Over time I was influenced by other thinkers who talked about world-views and interpersonal forces and much later by Walter Wink- the pause for reflection comes from him, Wink makes me consider that there are inner realities to our institutions and power structures, in his words an inner spirituality, a corporate culture, a collective personality, unwritten myths and scripts that we take for granted as true but are not completely true, thy have been warped and stand in need of redemption if humanity is to fully flourish.

So how did these verses about Spiritual warfare get coopted by those who are tempted towards flesh and blood militarism, who demonize their human opponents? I think in part it’s because they are on to something. As Wink notes, the Spiritual forces have no power apart from working through human systems. Just yesterday I saw a quote on a friend’s Facebook page that really threw a wrench in my sermon because I wanted to rest on my freshman achievement and say, it’s not about the people, it’s about the spiritual forces. The quote is from the mystic social activist Thomas Merton who wrote: When I criticize a system, they think I criticize them and that is of course because they fully accept the system and identify themselves with it. they fully accept the system and identify themselves with it.

So it gets complicated in two ways: one, a criticism of the system may be taken personally and that amplifies the conflict but also, we may identify the people with a system and work not just against the system, or the corporate culture or collective personality or worldview but against the people, the human beings who WE identify with that system because they identify with that system and that misdirects the conflict. We can make the distinction but there is always a connection.

And because there is that connection we need to be reminded of the DISTINCTION in order to preserve human dignity.

We wrestle not with flesh and blood but with rulers and cosmic powers and these powers are delighted when humans tear down other humans and break community. The author of Ephesians reminds us of an alternate Spiritual Power and Cosmic Principle.

According to chapter 1:10 God’s plan, the mystery of God’s will, is to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. All things, not uniformity but multiplicity and diversity, even as Ephesians 3 notes that God’s manifold wisdom is behind the way that God is working to bring many different peoples and countless unique individuals into a rich and colorful tapestry.

According to Ephesians 2:4 God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. If we have light its because of God’s love, so we hold out hope for all. Indeed, we can hold out hope for all, hope for you, hope for me, hope for people whose greed turns our stomach, whose politics fuels our anger, whose cruelty creates loathing in our hearts. Chris Dela Cruz, a minister in this presbytery who is working as Director of youth Initiatives at our local ecumenical non-profit Together Labs told me that in community organizing they have a saying that there are no permanent villains, in other words don’t write people off. Here’s why he told me that story. For the past two years the Presbytery was working to gift the property of the former Laurelhust Church to a Native American Organization called Future Generations Collaborative. They are using the building for wellness and educational space as they plan to place 8-10 tiny homes for mothers and their children on the 1 and a half acres of land that is just North of the Laurelhurst neighborhood in Northeast Portland. As you might imagine, the idea of putting more houses in a residential neighborhood, especially when its for low income folks didn’t sit well with all of the neighbors. What about crime and drugs they asked? What about parking? We already have a hard time parking on our streets and you are adding more housing without parking? Let’s be fair, not all of the neighbors were opposed and let’s be clear, those who are opposed are always louder than those who aren’t opposed and usually louder than those who are positively in favor. There was one neighbor who came to all of the neighborhood meetings and vocalized her concern about crime and drugs and parking again and again and again.

Until one meeting two years in, when she slipped in the back, sat quietly and at the end of the meeting walked forward, gave the director of Future Generations Collaborative a hug and slipped her a $1,000 check. Nobody saw that coming! There are no permanent villains. Grace works slowly and invisibly. Grace works. And, for the record, the Presbytery completed the gift of the property in April of this year.

Ephesians, in its own way reminds me that there is a power in the universe that moves our inward gaze outward, our selfishness towards generosity, our apathy towards love, our fragmented social fabric towards unity.

The scandal of the gospel is that God loves sinners, God loves people even when they are screwed up, when we are screwed up, even when they harm other people…God loves people and asks us to do the same.

Indeed in 2:14 we learn that in Christ Jesus those of us who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For Christ is our peace, in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall. There’s flesh and blood for you- bringing peace and unity. Why fight against that?

It hasn’t always played out that way but the vision of Ephesians and of so much of the Christian Scriptures drawing on key themes in the Hebrew Scriptures longs for the day when all will be neighbors united in love, where now we see division they dare to hope for a future with one new humanity. When we take time to listen and to cross the street or like the community organizers that sat with Nimbyism and patiently made their case we can move towards unity, one smile, one conversation, one contribution at a time.

We start on that journey by being rooted and grounded in love, as Ephesians reminds us, a love that comes from the Spirit. And we stand fast in love, distinguishing the struggle from the uman actors in order that love may win.

To go back to where we began with the quote from Walter Wink, “The command to love our enemies reminds us that our first task towards oppressors is to help them recover their humanity, and our humanity as well….We must also become human.” Yes, we are already human. At the same time we must strive to stand fast as humans, rather than debasing ourselves and tearing the human fabric, furthering the rips in our unity, or giving way to hate. May we all persevere in the divine love that completes our humanity, standing fast in the strength of the Spirit so that all may flourish. Amen.