7-26-20 Meditation

 Do you ever think about how many choices you make in any given day? I think the number would be mind-boggling if we actually counted. I means it begins with if or when we get out of bed, doesn’t it? And then it just continues throughout the day.

We choose what clothes to wear - maybe dress clothes from the waist up for those Zoom meetings (or worship videos) but gym shorts or pajama pants for comfort - what we choose to wear helps determine how we feel about ourselves and how others feel about us.

 We choose what, when, where and perhaps most importantly, how much to eat. The Covid-19 pandemic and the closures of gyms and workout facilities has resulted in what some are calling the Covid-15 weight gain.

 We choose how we spend our time - even if our workday is primarily spent at a job or working from home, most people I’ve talked to have expressed that they have much more flexibility in when and how they do their work.

 We choose our attitude - whether we feel happy, or angry, irritated or motivated; how we feel about something is a choice **we** make about how we respond to stimuli or circumstances around us. We often don’t think of it that way, but at its core, how we feel emotionally is a choice. Nobody can **make** us feel anything - it’s **always** a choice **we** make.

 We choose our friends, how close we are with those friends, how much we trust those friends, how much time we spend with them - all are choices. Similarly, we choose whether or not to be in community - whether we seek out community or engage when community seeks us out, or whether we reject or neglect community, possibly ending up a social loner. This pandemic makes it easy to live in isolation like Tom Hanks in the film “Cast Away,” with his volleyball turned companion Wilson. Conversely, we can still choose to live in, be a part of, surround ourselves with community, even if we need to be safely distanced.

 These are all choices we make…all day, every day. And all of these choices, to one degree or another, require some kind of preparation - some understanding of what’s expected, of what could happen, of what inclusion in that community means.

 The apostle Paul reminds us of the importance of community in Ephesians 6:18, the verse immediately following the passage we heard earlier, where he writes,

*“Offer prayers and petitions in the Spirit all the time. Stay alert by hanging in there and* ***praying for all believers.****” (Eph 6:18 CEB)* Sometimes we feel like dropping out, like throwing in the towel, like going off to some dark corner alone. But this verse is clear that community is vital in our lives. We all need people to have our spirits lifted. We need encouragement and support from others. We need the hope and companionship that others provide for us, just as we provide that for them. The human creature requires that kind of social interaction to walk with us through difficulty, hardship, and hurt so that we can be stronger and healthier in our lives, our families, our churches, our faith, and our communities.

 The passage we heard from Ephesians 6: 10-17 provides images of armor, of helmets, shields and the like, as symbols of strength, which is what we might expect from a first century author who looked around and saw armed Roman soldiers everywhere. But as Rev. James C. Howell writes in a commentary on this passage,

 “Paul’s words **feel** militaristic - but are they? Do they really support the talk we hear among some Christians about “spiritual warfare?” Or does Paul envision a non-militaristic sort of struggle that isn’t triumphalistic? We put on the armor, but this is not the first time Paul has used getting dressed as his…[metaphor.] Colossians 3 advises we put on meekness, kindness, and forgiveness. Paul saw Roman soldiers everywhere, so we can understand his use of the image…or, did he [perhaps] have Goliath in mind? Is Paul telling us how to fight? Or what we do **instead** of fighting? Paul writes, after all, as an “ambassador in chains” he tells us two verses later.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

 All of this reminds me of putting on my robe for ministry, specifically the alb, with the rope cincture that is worn around the waist, symbolizing our coming alongside, tying ourselves to the least, the last, and the lost in the world. Rev. Howell goes on to tell the story of Francis of Assisi “donning the garb of the poor during one battle in the Crusades, walking across no-man’s land between the warring armies barefooted, unarmed, and laughably vulnerable. This was so odd that the Arab soldiers put away their swords and took him to the sultan, with whom he became a friend. The whole image of being “armed” with peace, as Paul describes it in this passage, is paradoxical, which **had** to be Paul’s very point. So how do we think about what Paul intended here, in our modern context, without getting stuck on a literal militaristic image?”

 Paul’s intent is clear. He says in verse 12, “our battle is not against flesh and blood.” That is, our battle, our struggle, our conflict is not (or at least **should not**)be against our fellow human beings, against other beloved children of God, regardless of our differences. Our battle is against the powers and principalities, the systems of evil that divide and separate us one from another. And as we are “armed with peace,” as Paul writes, our posture is a **defensive** posture -defending ourselves and our communities against the powers of evil in the world. In Wesleyan terms, our role is first, to do no harm, but then to do all the good we can, in all the ways we can, to all the people we can, as often as we can. We do that, in this time of pandemic, in this time of protest against the powers and systems of evil that are racism, sexism, materialism, judgmentalism, and the like, by arming ourselves by putting on the mask of compassion - if not to protect ourself then to compassionately care for the other. Likewise, we cleanse our hearts in prayer and our hands with sanitizer, that when we reach out to community the only thing we spread is God’s caring compassion and love. We safeguard ourselves through space, physical space between ourselves so as to protect both of us, but also in the space we choose to occupy and how we occupy it. Is it a welcoming space or is it frightening or angry space? And then in our sheathes, rather than carrying a sword, we arm ourselves with love - love for God and love for neighbor.

 This is not and has not been an easy time for anyone. It’s hard to not be physically together in this space with our community, with friends and family for worship. It’s hard to do Vacation Bible School with and for our children from a distance by video. It’s hard to hold meetings in order to continue the work of the church that we’re called to do by Zoom and only see people on computer screens. But how we choose to respond and react to the reality of this pandemic is one of the most important choices we all will make. For some out there, unfortunately, folks who perhaps don’t have or don’t value community the way we in the church do, it’s a choice being made based on self-interest and what are perceived as personal rights. For the Christian, however, for the follower of Jesus Christ, it has to be a choice based on faith; faith in God first and foremost, but also faith that the scientific and medical knowledge that guides and influences decisions about mask mandates, social distancing, and the like are gifts given by God and being used for the benefit of the most people possible. But even more than that, it’s a choice based in love.

 So as we put on the full armor of God, as our scripture describes it, let us put on the belt of truth that tells us that our God is a God of love and that all that we serve God most honestly and humbly when the choices we make are done out of a love of God and a love of neighbor. And may the breastplate of righteousness encourage and empower us to do the right thing for others, for the community at large, rather than defiantly claim our own personal, individual rights to the detriment of others. And above all, in the many choices that you will make each and every day, may you choose to arm yourself with love - love of God, love of neighbor, love of enemy, love of family, and love of life. Be safe, be kind, be loving my friends. Amen.

1. Howell, James C., Commentary on Ephesians 6:10-20, [MinistryMatters.com](http://MinistryMatters.com)*,* August 20, 2018, Accessed July 20, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)