11-22-20, The Holy Way

Sermon on Ephesians 1:15—23

1. Introduction
2. There are earlier manuscripts of this letter which lack the phrase “in Ephesus.” This leads many scholars, and I agree with them, to believe that this is a “circular” letter, a letter sent to a number of churches with identical content but addressed to each church individually.
3. This letter lacks the personal messages we see in many of Paul’s letters. This also suggests that the letter is for a number of churches, rather than just one.
4. It is likely that, if Ephesians was indeed written by Paulk, and I believe that it was, it was written about the year 60.
5. Prayer
6. The text
7. (v. 15-19) **Regarding the Ephesians (and others) receiving the letter** I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints [We need to remember here that, while some of our Christian siblings have a very specific understanding of what “the saints” means, Paul here is just referring to the church family.], and for this reason
8. (v. 16) I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers [Clearly, regular prayer is an important part of Paul’s relationship with God]
9. (v. 17—19) I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory
10. (v. 17b) May give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him,
11. (v. 18 & 19) So that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, [We now figuratively regard the heart as the source of emotion and sentiment. At the time of this writing, the heart was understood to be the actual source of thinking, feeling, and intentional action.] you may know
12. What is the hope to which he has called you
13. What are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints
14. And what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to his great power. [I take this to mean that even our belief is a function of God’s goodness and power, and not our own.]
15. (v. 20—23) **Regarding God** God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places
16. (v. 21) Far above all rule and authority and power and dominion [both earthly and spiritual] and above every name that is named, not only in this age but in the age to come
17. (v. 22 & 23) And he has put all things under his feet [This is a direct reference to Psalm 110:1.] and has made him head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all
18. What shall we take away from this passage this morning?

Two key ideas come to me out of this passage. The first has to do with our faith and our devotion to God. When Paul writes to the churches in the area, including Ephesus, he is responding to what he has heard about them. He writes to affirm and to encourage. And his affirmation is on two different aspects of their life together. One is their faith in God. The other is the love that they have and express to one another.

For Paul, faith and love always go together. It is an impossibility for him that Christians could have faith in God, but not show love. This is because acting in love, even the capacity to practice love, grows out of God’s love for us.

It breaks my heart when I hear people claim to follow Jesus and then speak in hateful, unkind ways toward others, whether those others are Christians or not. My plea to you, brothers and sisters, is to be faithful to God and to be gentle, kind, humble, and gracious in your dealings with all you encounter.

The second idea that comes to me out of this passage has to do with who Jesus is in our lives. I think that we can mostly connect with two of the traditional roles which are attributed to him. These are the roles of Jesus as Prophet and Priest. We read Jesus’ teaching, we hear his parables and his discussions, and we accept that Jesus communicates the message of God to God’s people. This is the traditional role of the prophet.

We also can fairly easily see Jesus as our High Priest. We recognize that Jesus’ death on the cross is, at least in part if not entirely, an act of sacrifice. We have nothing that we can bring to the altar of sacrifice that is sufficient to bring reconciliation with God. So, Jesus brings himself, at the same time both fully human and fully God, to sacrifice on our behalf. Jesus is simultaneously the Pries offering the sacrifice on our behalf and the Sacrifice itself, perfect in every way.

But the third role, that of King, may be a little less accessible to us than the others. To begin with, as Americans, we aren’t all that big on kings. In our minds, we settled that issue in the 1770’s. We believe in presidents, but most of us have a very clear understanding of the boundaries of that office. Last year I was having a Facebook argument with a woman I love dearly. She was talking about what the president of the US is entitled to in terms of respect, and she compared that to my relationship with a mutual friend who had been my boss for about twenty years. I suspect that I speak for many of us when I told her, “The President of the United States is not my boss. He is my employee.” That didn’t settle the argument, but it did clear my thinking some about how I view the highest executive office in this nation.

But, my friends, when it comes to Jesus, he is King. Jesus has an absolute claim on my life, on my loyalty, and on my devotion. I may argue with anybody else, less or more successfully, but I have no standing to argue with Jesus. Jesus created everything there is. Jesus brought me into being. And Jesus saved me from the consequences of my own sin, both past, and future. My allegiance to Jesus comes before every other loyalty, including my loyalty to my country.

So, what does that look like in practice? How does that truth frame my life, and how does it frame yours? In the first centuries of the church, the emperors of Rome came to realize the potential danger posed by people whose first loyalty was to Jesus rather than to the Emperor. And so, some Christians were given the choice: either renounce Jesus and recognize the Emperor as sovereign or die. One of the factors that contributed to the growth of the church in the early centuries was the devotion and courage with which so many Christians met their death, rather than to deny Jesus and live.

The picture is a little complicated, of course. One of the issues the church in the first several centuries of the church was whether or not a brother or sister who had denied Jesus could repent and be restored to the community of faith.

Fortunately, it is exceedingly doubtful that any of us will be placed in that horrible position. And I myself am pretty cautious about assuming how brave I would be if I were faced with the choice. I hope and pray that Jesus would give me the courage to refuse ot deny him.

But there are other ways that we choose for or against Jesus in our lives. Every decision we make about how we will use our resources of time and ability and money run up against this question. Every time we become aware of hunger, we are faced with it. Every time we learn of unjust systems that benefit some and harm others, we face it. Every time we want to react in anger or in violence, we are faced with it.

My beloved, may we choose, every time, to follow that preacher from up in Galilee. Every time may we act in love, even if we haven’t been shown love. Every time Jesus asks us to take a risk for him and for his Kingdom. Jesus is Prophet, Priest, and King. May we always know who Jesus is, and who and whose we are. May it be so. Amen