

“Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.”

“Rebels for the Spirit”

Message for August 23

I think the book of Ephesians should be renamed the “Book of First Congregationalists of Prescott.” So many of the words of advice and counsel that Paul offered to the good people of Ephesus apply to us and to who, what, and where we are today in our church. It’s almost as if we are living in parallel time zones thousands of years apart, going through many of the same experiences as we grow in faith and serve our community: Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians for us, too.

For, this passage is not one that induces namby-pamby navel-gazing or quiet, thoughtful meditation around a campfire while everyone sings “Kumbayah.” It is no gentle suggestion to consider appropriate action or a subtle intimation that hints at what we should do to be nice. Listen again, and see if you can hear Paul’s earnest appeal to the good people of Ephesus to take some initiative to become Rebels for the Spirit...

Ephesians 6:10-20

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak”.

I find myself nodding as I read this – there are times that I absolutely know the Spirit is preparing me to go into battle for God. As your pastor, I’m also an “ambassador in chains” – the mystery of the good news, and the beliefs I hold so close to my heart – beliefs about justice and sharing, about tolerance and understanding, about Jesus’ forgiveness of my sins drive much of what my heart tells me I must do. I feel the power of these words wash over me each time I read them; my street clothes are covered with the invisible protection of the Spirit, and I know I’m ready to step out and get to work. And judging from so many of your acts in our community from one day to the next, I have a feeling that you hear this same call to action that I do or you wouldn’t be members of this church!

In fact, truly listening to God's command through the voice of Paul's letter to the Ephesians must bring about a universal response in serious believers, because if we take a look at our shared heritage in the United Church of Christ, we'll find that our ancestors also felt the Spirit's call, layered themselves in Holy Armor to take up God's cause, and became Rebels for the Spirit. Because so many of you have asked to be reminded of what we stand for as a denomination, today, I would like to spend time lifting up the saints who went before us and tell again some of the stories of our faith. We have much to inspire us!

The disciples are the earliest rebels, who finally found the strength to come out of hiding and hit the road. They experienced God's power as they stood among many voices speaking one faith and felt the Spirit blow through them. There was no way they could ignore the presence of God and the need for God's message to get out – and while it meant torture and death for many, we know the message survived. For the disciples, being Rebels for the Spirit meant laying the foundation for the faith of all believers who came after them. Whole towns took up the cause, and this message from Paul was written to one such town to inspire the people and remind them they are not alone.

Centuries later, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli – all contemporaries who believed the too-powerful Roman Catholic church was misusing its authority and the trust of the people – broke away and laid groundwork for reform of several types. Lutherans, German Reformed and English Congregationalists all looked toward these leaders who believed that we could speak directly to God, and didn't need an intermediary like a Pope or the mysticism of transformation of bread and wine to remember the Jesus who saved us all. Working at times under death threats, these leaders followed their call to serve as they fundamentally believed God intended.

In the early history of America, members of several religious groups in Europe broke from denominations which suffocated their ability to worship with their hearts, and found their way to this continent in hopes of finally being allowed to worship God as they believed: German Reformed to Pennsylvania, and Puritans and Separatists to New England. These believers eventually formed subgroups known as Quakers, Baptists and Congregationalists.

The sense of religious independence and autonomy of these people revealed itself as being part of the spiritual ethic they brought with them when the Mayflower landed in New England in 1620. Convinced that God "has yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy Word," Puritans (who could no longer support the Church of England) set about living as they felt God called them to do and established a cooperative community of faith in the New World.

They also took an early stand against slavery. In 1700, The Rev. Samuel Sewall wrote a pamphlet called, "The Selling of Joseph" which almost a century before Abolitionists took action, spoke out against bondage of other humans for slave labor. As slavery became more of an issue, and the Abolitionist movement took root, Black members of a Puritan church in Boston broke away to form the African Church on Beacon Hill...this would eventually become a meeting place for Abolitionists to plan escape routes and quietly gather forces against slavery...Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass all visited this church and spoke to the people to keep the Spirit's fire alive in the hearts of the slaves.

Others worked with the Native Americans in the new land; because smallpox and other diseases brought by the colonists impacted the native people so strongly, bold leaders like Pastor John Elliot worked to not only convert them to Christianity, but also to raise their standard of living so they might live as comfortably as their colonist contemporaries.

In the American west, dedicated Congregationalists began schools for not only Native Americans, but also for the Hispanic members of their community – these schools offered lessons in English as well as training for trade work. In our own church here in Prescott, Arizona, Reverend T.W. Otis taught English as well as Christianity to newly arrived Chinese immigrants. This act of charity was not accepted kindly by many in our town!

As the United States of America matured, so did the historical UCC. Four very different religious traditions - the Congregationalists, the Christians, the Evangelicals and the Reformed Church – each took a rebel's stand in some fashion on their own, and then in 1957 joined forces to become a United Church for God. Here is a short list of some of the amazing “firsts” the UCC offers the world as evidence of the denomination's willingness to be rebels and do God's work – even if an act is unpopular to others. Here's the list...

First Experiment in Democracy – The Mayflower Compact, 1630

First Official Paper against Slavery – “The Selling of Joseph,” 1700

First act of civil disobedience in the United States – the Boston Tea Party, 1773

First African American to publish anything – Phillis Wheatley, 1773

First African American to be ordained in a Protestant denomination – Lemuel Haynes, 1785.

First Anti-slavery Society with multi-racial leadership – the American Missionary Association, 1846

First Woman Pastor – Antoinette Brown, 1853

First Gay Pastor – William R. Johnson, 1972

First African American Leader of an Integrated Denomination – Joseph H. Evans is elected president of the UCC, 1976

First Hymnal to use equal male and female images of God, 1995

First Denomination to support same-gender marriage equality, 2005

And this is just a short list of the “firsts!” If you were to read some of the literature which includes more condensed versions of other action taken by the groups working out of the four branches of the UCC since the Mayflower Compact, you'd be amazed at how many causes, justice issues and equal rights issues have been addressed by our forebears all the way down the line.

It would seem that Paul's letter to the Ephesians (and perhaps this particular passage) had hit a nerve, and those who came before us in the UCC listened hard and followed-through. They recognized that with the freedom of loving and worshiping God in the manner that spoke to them best came a certain responsibility to act as God commands us. This passage, then, is more than a friendly letter to check into the well-being of a town that Paul had adopted on one of his journeys as he brought people to Christ.

It is a "call to arms" – a challenge to stand tall against the forces of evil on behalf of God. It is Paul's pep talk to the defense line in a championship game – the rallying cry of warriors eager to charge and change what's wrong, armed with the Word, the Spirit and the Truth.

It is God, speaking through Paul, shoving us into action to do good work in God's world – especially for those who can't speak or act for themselves. God is telling us, "I'm really glad you love me and worship me – that's great. But, you know what? I would love it more if you would help me take care of some things while you're praising me. Now, I know it can be a little scary to stick your neck out, because there are other forces who might work against you, so I'm going to give you an amazing Spirit and the tools you need to be successful...I'll never leave you alone in this. Trust me – love me – do my work. It will be all right."

I believe we here at First Congregational Church are listening intently to this pep-talk. We have shown that we trust God to gather us together again, and to stand firm as a family united in today's world. And because I know so many of you so well, I am convinced that each of us can take up our armor in our own way against the forces of evil, of hatred and judgment, of injustice and inequality and get out there to do God's work. There's much to be done in many areas, and it's time.

For some, this will mean taking small steps, because being a Rebel for the Spirit can be a little unnerving. For those who tend to be more reckless and willing to take a risk, this is the opportunity of a lifetime! For all, whatever the Spirit calls you to do at any level of involvement will be appropriate, because **if God is at the center of your actions**, you are absolutely living as a Rebel for the Spirit. Paul said...

"Take up the whole armor of God...fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness... put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace... take the shield of faith...take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit...pray in the Spirit at all times...keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints".

God has blessed us and called us to action. It's exciting, it can be scary, and it's appropriate that we answer with our hearts, our behavior, and our lives. I'm excited to be working with you as we begin new ministries and reach out into our community to bring God to others...I'm ready. I know you are, too, so let's get started...God's strength and Peace to us all!

Amen.