

Standing Firm

Ephesians 6:10-20

Sunday August 23, 2015

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I'm going to give you the punchline for this sermon. I'm giving it to you first so you don't miss it. This will be on the quiz; this will be on the final. Here's the triple point of this sermon:

- 1) Prayer helps. It doesn't always help in the way, or on the timeline, that we envision, but it always helps.
- 2) When we are stressed, it's hard to remember to pray or that prayer will make a difference. We have to encourage those who are stressed to pray, and we have to teach, and learn how to pray.
- 3) It is our job to teach this, to model this, for those we baptize

Hold on to these points – we will return to them later.

Imagine a time when you have been overwhelmed. When things in life have become just too much; when it has rained and then poured; when you have felt under attack. These are paralyzing moments, when it becomes hard to think, when we are so focused on putting one foot in front of another that survival seems the only achievable goal. And sometimes, it seems that even survival might not be possible – that something might be happening that we may not be able to bear

Difficulty – adversity – loss – overwhelming suffering – the sense that we are under attack – that people are gunning for us and so we must be on guard at every moment – that the upheaval and worry and pain that come with life is all too much to bear: everyone knows these moments. Even the sunniest personalities among us, when pushed, will admit that at times, life seems to ask too much.

The people of the church at Ephesus were under attack. They were truly under attack. They weren't imagining it – it was real. They were under attack and suspicion at all times. The society did not understand them. The government made practicing their faith illegal, and the penalties alternated from distinctly unpleasant to mortal. Many were living in contradiction of family norms, and so were shunned, disowned, disinherited. They were, as minorities have been throughout human history, blamed for any disaster, natural or human-made, that occurred

Predictably, mobs would appear, seemingly out of nowhere, and respond with mayhem, destruction, attack, and even murder, to rid the community of the evil agents they had come to see in those who followed this new Messiah, Jesus. The idea was that this would appease the gods, and make the community safe – that is, ancient Christians often played the scapegoat.

Living in the midst of overwhelming circumstances causes stress – and when left unaddressed, this stress can rise to the level of trauma. Stress and trauma have become a major research area, because these affect the body and the mind, and compound physical problems already present. Every major system in the human body is adversely affected by longterm stress and trauma.

- 1) Your central nervous system triggers a “fight or flight” response

A constant sense of need to confront attackers, or to run away from them. Cortisol and adrenaline, two hormones produced in the endocrine system, are released to raise all bodily systems to high alert status, to ensure rapid response to threats. These hormones should return to normal, and lower the threat level when calm prevails once again; but if your body isn't getting the message that you are no more under threat, elevated levels

of these hormones continue to be released and can take a toll on your health. Symptoms that can emerge include:

Headaches

Insomnia

Irritability

Anxiety

And Depression

Which may lead to

Overeating, or not eating enough

Abuse of drugs or alcohol and

Social withdrawal

- 2) Your respiratory and circulatory systems go into high gear when under stress, so your heart pumps faster to get your blood, and the oxygen that moves with it, to the site of problems. You also find yourself breathing faster so that you have more oxygen, so more strength, to withstand the onslaught of whatever is coming your way.

Over time, if these situations do not self-correct, or if the stress continues long term, it may result in high blood pressure or cardiac disease, including increased risk for heart attack or stroke

- 3) Your liver may produce extra glucose in response to feeling threatened, so that you have more energy
If this is not processed well, it may lead to pre-diabetic or diabetic conditions
- 4) The increase in hormones, high heartrate and respiration, and a load of glucose can lead to digestive problems.

You can have stomachaches, nausea, and vomiting. Food stops being digested properly, which may result in diarrhea or constipation

- 5) Your muscular system tenses when you feel stress or trauma. This is to protect the muscles, and the rest of the body, from potential injury. Muscles should relax when the threat is removed – but under constant stress they may not relax, leading to headache, backache, or body aches. These may lead you to stop exercising and turn to pain medication to deal with discomfort – which is not good for you to take long term, and which sets up your body for other problems.
- 6) Stress and trauma make it difficult to feel sexual or sensual, to feel or express normal and healthy desires. Chronic stress, or trauma, can affect all parts of the human reproductive systems, creating difficulties in the production and release of hormones needed to spur reproduction and to maintain pregnancies.
- 7) Finally, our immune systems are deeply impacted by long term stress and trauma. While the hormones produced during stress initially increase the immune response, over time, they damage the immune system's ability to respond appropriately. Chronic stress can make it more difficult to fight off viruses and infections. That is, people under chronic stress will get sick more and stay sick longer, which increases the burden that is causing the stress in the first place.

So – the members of the church at Ephesus knew chronic stress – and even trauma. They were under real threat at all times. And we know chronic stress – chronic stress is part of modern life. In our time, we know that chronic stress is bad for us, and leads to all kinds of problems

So what are we to do?

One option would be to get the stress to stop – to walk away from the high-demand job, to leave destructive relationships, to enroll in a less demanding educational program, to move to a smaller community. Make a change and improve your life!

But change carries its own stress load, and we can't always change, or remove, the stressors in our lives.

The Christians of Ephesus could not change what was happening around them, or to them. And often, we cannot either. Often, life does not afford us the opportunity to wake up one morning and say, I'm done with this. I'm through. I'm so over this and I'm moving on.

What if the stress – the long term, chronic stress that you are suffering – is that someone in the family, someone you love, is sick? Or what if the IRS and other creditors are calling with a chilling regularity – and you find yourself bouncing from one financial crisis to another, robbing Peter to pay Paul? Or what if a job has been lost and no others are readily appearing? Or what if a child, or a grandchild, has made bad choices and is suffering as a result? Or what if your marriage is falling apart?

In any of these situations and more, it may not be easy – and it may be impossible – to walk away, to rid oneself of the burden of unhealthy, long term stress. So what do we do with the stress that we cannot escape, the kind of stress that we can neither flee nor fight?

The answer our text offers is this: rely on God. Rely on God's power and strength. Rely on the armor, the protection, offered by God. That is the agent – the sole agent – that will make it possible for you to be strong, and stand and proclaim. This armor, this protection afforded by God, includes truth and righteousness, peace and faith, salvation and the Word of God. And all of these are available to you, to us, through prayer.

Pray, the author says to the Ephesian Christians. Pray, pray, and pray again. The author of this letter knows what stress, what suffering, what perversity and adversity is being faced by the members of the church, and that the agents of stress, of suffering, of adversity are not going to disappear, or stop their activity, anytime soon – and that the members of the church have no escape route – and if they chose to fight those who are attacking the church, that would clearly be suicidal. So the letter advises a different course – a more healthy course – a faithful course: to lean on God, and the protection God is offering, and to pray to God in all circumstances. To pray: for others, for yourself, for the church, for those in leadership, for those who suffer.

Today we baptized the newest member of the family of God in Jesus Christ. This small one knows little today of the suffering life can present, and we hope and pray that it is a long time before she knows of any stress or adversity. And yet, if we are realistic, we know that the time will come, and times will come again, and again, when she comes to know all too much about stress. Because Sophia Marie is born into this life, with all its struggles and opportunities, all its challenges and joys. Because Sophia is born into this life, we know that Sophia will know stress.

We who took vows to Sophia and her parents today – how will we keep those vows?

We must review what I said at the beginning:

- 1) Prayer helps. It doesn't always help in the way, or on the timeline, that we envision, but it always helps.

- 2) When we are stressed, it's hard to remember to pray or that prayer will make a difference. We have to encourage those who are stressed to pray, and we have to teach, and learn how to pray.
- 3) It is our job to teach this, to model this, for those we baptize.

In order to be responsible to those whom we baptize and their families, we need to be ready to assist in forming them in the practices of the faithful life. Prayer is chief among these. We need to come to know God through prayer, to take the burdens and stress of life to God, to ask for help, expecting response.

Stress and trauma stop us from thinking. We can feel powerless – afraid – overwhelmed. We can actually feel immobilized, and come to believe we have no options – that there is nothing we can do to make things better.

Prayer is always an option – always a very good choice. Communication with God is always there, always available to us. This is why the author of our text so emphasizes prayer, mentioning it five times in the last three verses: three times using the words, pray or prayer, and twice using the word supplication – which is, pleading. The author actually advises the church to plead with God.

In a context of stress, when those who followed Jesus were under attack, the letter encourages them to remember the presence of God, the closeness of God, the access they have to God through prayer.

Friends, we may also need these reminders. We may also need a refresher course – or an introductory course! to keep our minds focused on a sure and secure source of help.

And we don't have to be wordsmiths, or masters at rhetoric. In the midst of difficulty and stress, we can simply say HELP ME. We can say SHOW ME THE WAY. We can say I DON'T UNDERSTAND. And God will respond – not always in the ways we envision – not always in the ways we think we need – and often not on the timeline we suggest – but God will respond, every single time.

Today we baptized a young one, and made promises to her, and to her family. As her family, and as her church family, we sincerely hope and pray that chronic stress does not feature in her life, or in her family's life. But we do know that as cute and cuddly as she is now, one day, Sophia Marie will be a teenager. There are people in the room, Jess and Kyle, who know from hard experience, that there is a chance that there will be times when Sophia may have difficulty listening to you. And there is a chance that there will be times when you struggle to communicate with her.

There is a chance, however small, that your relationship with teenage Sophia will cause stress for all of you

This is why it is crucial that now, and as she grows, she sees you praying. The spiritual practices which parents engage are the most important teacher, the most important model, for the forming of spiritual life and practices for their children. So long before she becomes a teenager, she needs to see you pray, and learn to pray with you.

And this is why Sophia needs to see models, others whom she trusts and learns to love, here at First Presbyterian. She needs to see us praying. She needs to hear us praying. She needs to learn that we rely on God, so that when life gets more difficult than it is now, she can don God's protection, God's armor, and be a person who knows the path to God that is prayer.

Friends, brothers and sisters, we made promises today: promises to Sophia and her parents, promises we have made to many others. Let us keep these promises, by sharing the wealth, the promise, the good and the truth that we know – that prayer helps – always, often in surprising ways, and often in a time we don't expect. Always, always, prayer helps.

If we model this faithfully to Sophia, and all her small sisters and brothers in Christ, we will keep the promises we make this day.