

August 8, 2021

Before Pastor Joseph went on vacation he gave me some guidance and advice, including an admonition that a good sermon length is between 8 and 12 minutes. Any longer than that and you'll start clicking "OFF" on Zoom, changing that YouTube channel to cute animal videos or picking up your folding chairs and heading for the parking lot.

Well, I think I can assure you that there's very little danger of that happening. After all, I spent more than 40 years in broadcast news, where the discipline is brevity: Short, declarative sentences; say as much as you can in as few words as possible. We were always writing on deadline and there was an oft-used saying in the newsroom: "If I'd had more time I would have written less". Now, I had plenty of time to prepare today's sermon. So, while it's not likely to rank among the best you've ever heard it will NOT be among the longest.

Let's take a look at today's second lesson....

The thing about Paul's letter to the Ephesians is that it might not have been written by Paul, and it might not have been intended for the church at Ephesus alone. Some scholars believe the letter was ghost-written by a close disciple of Paul's who was intimately familiar with his thinking. They note that the phrasing and word usage is different from other writings attributed to Paul. And Paul's letters often contained

personal references, sometimes greetings to specific people he knew. Ephesians is almost devoid of that – it could have been written to any of Paul’s followers anywhere. Which is why some scholars think it was intended as a “circular” letter, to be CIRCULATED among Paul’s scattered flock – Ephesians, Romans, Corinthians, Galatians – fill in the blank.

The letter is believed to have been written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome. He’d made 2 visits to Ephesus, the most recent one lasting about 3 years. Ephesus, at the time, was a busy port city and trading hub. Over the centuries since, silt filled in the harbor to such an extent that now the city is 6 miles inland.

In Paul’s day, aside from shipping and trading, the biggest part of the economy was the pagan temple of the Greek goddess Artemis. There were many craftsmen who made a good living selling Artemis idols. Paul, apparently, was a very effective preacher of the Gospel, and when his church started drawing people away from the temple the artisans’ business dried up. Finally, they rioted and drove Paul out of town.

Today’s lesson from Ephesians begins with the words “So, then”, which begs the question “What came before?”

My own Bible is the Revised Standard Version, or RSV, that I was given in 1960 when I was confirmed at the Community Methodist Church in Ozone Park, New York. In the RSV this passage begins with the word

“Therefore”. “So, then”, “therefore” – pretty much the same thing. They both imply they we’ve come in late. We’ll come back to that. Ephesians is essentially written in two parts. The first 3 chapters talk about the awesome power of God and the glorious blessings bestowed on us by God’s grace. Two weeks ago we read from Chapter 3: “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God”. In Chapter 2, Paul says that before God’s grace redeemed the world humankind was “dead” through “trespasses and sins”. “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ”. And Paul writes in Chapter 1 that God “chose us” in Christ “before the foundation of the world”.

And here’s the heart of Martin Luther’s theology: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – NOT because of works. “We are God’s workmanship”, says Paul, “created in Christ Jesus for good works”.

So that all comes before “Therefore” in Chapter 4. And the word appears no fewer than 5 times more in Chapters 4 and 5. “Therefore” is the hinge, the pivot point of Paul’s letter: You know all the wonderful things God has done for you, THEREFORE here’s what YOU are called to

do: Be unified, stop squabbling among yourselves. Instead of dwelling on your differences remember that you are all part of the body of Christ. Renounce all wrongdoing. Be honest and charitable and positive in your relationships.

Paul says, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. Now, I was always confused by that. Is Paul saying the Holy Spirit is dead or has abandoned us? No. In my study for this sermon I learned that a better word to help our understanding is “AGGRIEVE” – “Do not aggrieve the Holy Spirit”. In other words, don’t give the Holy Spirit any grief”.

So what does something written 2,000 years ago mean for us? Well, maybe we should read this as Paul’s letter to the church at Wyckoff and ask ourselves, “Have we gotten the message? Are we a ‘THEREFORE’ church?” I’d like to suggest that we are.

A defining characteristic of this congregation is that we recognize God’s love in our lives and respond accordingly. In the passage from Ephesians we read 2 weeks ago, Paul tells his followers he prays “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love’.

I’ve always appreciated that Advent is a giving church. We ARE grounded in God’s love, THEREFORE we help the Center for Food Action feed hungry families in our community.

Paul says God “CHOSE US”before the foundation of the world”.

THEREFORE we collect school supplies for kids whose parents don't have the money.

Paul says we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works”. THEREFORE, Advent – even before I got here – was helping Southeast Asian refugees settle in the United States.

By grace we have been saved, not because we earned it but because it is the freely-given gift of God. THEREFORE, our church has hosted an overflow shelter for the homeless of Bergen County and we volunteer our time and resources to minister to Hoboken's homeless through St. Mathew Trinity Lutheran Church.

Paul writes that God loves us even when we're unloveable. THEREFORE, we respond with our generous support for the Wyckoff Love Fund and other organizations working for the good of our entire community.

Paul tells the Wyckoffians that we “are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God”. THEREFORE, we use our Endowment Fund not to pay our own bills but to support religious and secular groups that focus on helping people.

There are many more examples of our good works, but I think you get the idea. THEREFORE, I'm done.