

“FINALLY...”

Scripture Readings: Ephesians 6:10-20, Hebrews 11:9-13, 12:1-3

Finally...

My father got better at saying “*I love you*” as he got older, though he often made it plural - “*Your mother and I love you.*” When he was younger and more foolish you had to interpret it, you had to parse it out from his behavior.

“Here’s some money for new tires your car. Winter’s coming.”

Translation: “*I love you.*”

“I’m glad you didn’t go out tonight like you usually do.”

Translation: “*I love you.*”

“I’m not sure what that play was about but you sure put an awful lot into it.”

Translation: “*I love you.*”

So here’s my good Midwestern love language to you:

You know, these past 15 years could have been worse.

Translation: “*I love you.*”

I’m more than my father’s age now, the father that I remember from my youth, and despite my best intentions and my youthful vows – ***I will NEVER end up like the old man!*** - I often find myself just as foolish as he was, including not saying “*I love you*” except in my own obscure language of jokes and sarcasm, teasing and self-deprecation.

So here it is: I love you.

Finally... that’s what I want to say. I love you.

I wish I had the grace of the Apostle Paul whose final words written to the people of the church at Ephesus have “*I love you*” written all the way through them.

“Finally...” writes Paul, *“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of God’s power.”*

There’s some question as to whether Paul himself or an unnamed Minister associated with Paul wrote this letter – Priscilla? Aquila? Silas? One of the characteristics of Paul’s letters was his by-name shout outs at the end and that doesn’t show up in Ephesians. But it does here: Sue Mauthe, John Toussaint, Ann Egan, Paul Karch, Mary Heller, Katie Eiden, Curt Detjen, Pat McConnell, Jan Kosteke... They were the members of the Pastoral Search Committee who brought me here to this church – our church – your church. When I met with them for the first time, they told me about your hopes, dreams, and aspirations as a congregation. We’ve been successful in achieving so many of those goals together.

But as Reinhold Niebuhr wrote,

“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.

You probably have seen the cartoon of the preacher standing in the pulpit. He says, *“I asked my spouse to look over my sermon this morning and cut out all the parts that were dull, boring, or unnecessary.”* Then he takes out his sermon pages and says, *“So in conclusion...”*

Paul or a nameless minister who loved her church, concludes the letter with *“Finally...”*

“Finally... be strong in the Lord and in the strength of God’s power...” Skipping ahead to more memorable verses of this pastoral love letter: *“Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand the evil day... fasten the belt of truth around your waist... put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace... take the shield of faith... the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. “*

In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas wrote a sermon based on this passage from Ephesians. He told his listeners that there are five days of evil from which this armor defends us:

1. the day of iniquity, when we and others are foolish and sinful;
2. the day of prosperity, when our own good fortune makes us forget the things that are most important.
3. the day of adversity, when things start going against us;
4. the day of temptation when our lives take a serious turn in the wrong direction;
5. the day of judgment, when our mistakes catch up with us.

The highest calling and privilege as a Pastor is to be asked to accompany people through one of those five days.

- You told me how someone broke your heart or confessed to me your own foolishness.
- You allowed me to celebrate with you a new marriage, a new church, a new child.
- You looked for hope the day after you were fired from a job; you shared with me the depth of grief and despair at an unexpected death.
- You shared with me the impossible life moments when you were asked to choose between your God-given baptismal identity and being part of a church, family, or marriage.

Those are the moments or, as Aquinas calls them, **days** that define a pastorate and define our faith.

Two days stand out in my years of ministry here:

The day of prosperity –

In the small world of my career – a UCC Wisconsin pastor – First Congregational UCC of Appleton is not just a BIG deal, but the BIGGEST deal. To be called here was a singular honor and the capstone of my career as a pastor in the United Church of Christ.

To worship with this choir, these musicians, this organist, these children and youth, this congregation that leans into a sermon rather than leans back to take a nap, to join in the incredible breadth and depth of mission in this church; the local, regional, statewide, national, and international mission partnerships of First Congregational... well, I've loved it. And as I began here, it was pretty heady stuff.

Between us, I confess that at clergy gatherings in particular, I had a little bit of a swag. Oh, yeah... I'm THAT guy, Senior Pastor at First in Appleton...

What is it Aquinas told us? *"The day of prosperity, when our own good fortune makes us forget the things that are most important."*

It was early on in my ministry here when I was working on my sermon at home, late one Saturday night. Dee asked how it was going, and I told her I was going to preach about Peter trying to walk on the water and about how faith in Christ is like learning to waterski – it takes some courage and persistence but once you get up on those skis it's an absolute joy.

Dee seemed unimpressed with the analogy so, in the middle of the night, long after she had gone to sleep, I scrapped the whole idea. Instead, I pulled out a sermon I had written back in seminary for my Human Sexuality class, *"A Christian Ethic of Sex,"* something like that...

Sunday morning, I preached this bold sermon, but Dee happened to be volunteering in Sunday School. When she got out, she asked one of her church friends how the sermon had gone.

"It was excellent," she said. *"Steve spoke with such great insight."*

Dee replied, *"Oh, don't listen to him. He only tried it twice, and he fell down both times."*

Whether or not that really happened is beside the point. I was a fool to become self-impressed by titles or positions of authority. And so many, including Dee, have provided a soft landing for my inflation of ego. You have made clear to me that you wanted a servant of the gospel, someone to share the hope, joy, lessons, and love of Jesus. And you let me know that is something I could do best by simply being myself.

That's why I included TWO Epistle Readings this morning, readings that catch us coming and going, putting on and taking off. Writing in the name of Paul, the author of Hebrews speaks to new Christians: *"As you run the race of faith,"* the author tells them, *"take it off – the sin, the fear, the anger, the resentment, the disappointment, the sadness – take it ALL off – the things that weigh you down – so that you can run the race with perseverance to the end."*

That's the word we've needed to hear on the day of prosperity – take it off, because those things that pump you up end up weighing you down. Keep your focus on that which really matters. Remember who you are and whose you are, and you'll be good to go, all the way to the end.

The other day I want to talk about is **the day of adversity**.

Sometimes a group becomes associated with one person in our minds. One person seems to embody the important qualities of the group for us. Often folks think of a Pastor in this way, that's why the day a pastor leaves can be a day of adversity for the church.

One of the most senior members of the church approached me before the service this morning with tears in her eyes. *"Oh, Pastor Steve, what will we ever do without you?"*

I tried to reassure her. *"It's okay. I'm sure your next pastor will be even better than I was."*

She said, *"That's what the last pastor said but they keep getting worse and worse!"*

Sometimes people think of the Pastor as the living embodiment of the church and that's what makes a day like today a day of adversity. Pastors can make the same mistake. It's part of the mystery of the human heart and mind, I guess, that we can try to love everybody but still do it best one person at a time.

Among others, Maynard Beemer was that person for me. His ever-present smile, goofy laugh, enormous heart, passion for justice, deep wisdom, and his sheer size and strength spoke to me of the best qualities of this church. When Maynard died suddenly followed so closely by Pastor Kathryn Kuhn's death, I struggled emotionally and, to some extent, spiritually.

These were the questions I struggled with for several months: God, how can the irreplaceable be replaced? How can we ever be restored? How can we ever be the same again?

It took a long while, but through the patient listening and shared grieving of my spouse, Pastor Nick, and so many of you from my church family, the hurt subsided.

Maynard and Kathryn haven't been replaced, of course. And we never have been the same again. But God doesn't call us to relive golden ages. God calls us to the new possibilities and new life the future offers us. That was the heart of Maynard and Kathryn's ministries and that's the heart of the spirit of this church.

That was my day of adversity. And you helped me bear it, survive that day:

fasten the belt of truth around your waist... put on the breastplate of righteousness...

There's a strange thing about the whole armor of God. You think of armor's military purpose, to make one invulnerable, but God's armor seems to make us **more** vulnerable.

- Not a belt but the rainbow suspenders of truth which make us feel the downward tug of the false more vividly;
- Not a breastplate but a comfortable turtleneck that helps overcome the cowardice of silence that sometimes closes our throats;

- those gospel shoes are gonna be my old white patent leather Disco shoes with three-inch heels – put on your own most outrageous shoes because they will carry you to places at the very limits of your strength, and sometimes beyond;
- not a shield of faith but a bedazzled denim jacket of faith that just dares the world to try and take away our joy;
- helmet of salvation, no, but the fedora of fidelity with a lovely white feather of self-compassion that rescues us from the negativity and chaos of our own thoughts;
- and not a sword strapped at our side but a good sturdy garden shovel at the shoulder so that we can quickly clean up the cowpies and horse hockey being spread all around us.

Not invulnerable but MORE vulnerable. God's armor opens us up; it doesn't shut us in. God's armor makes us think and feel; it doesn't close our minds or dull our feelings. God's armor makes us reach and experience; it doesn't hide us in a shell. God's armor enables us to survive, but it doesn't protect us.

The whole armor of God enables us to survive, in particular, those most difficult days in our life: the day of iniquity, the day of prosperity, the day of adversity, the day of temptation, the day of judgment.

A scholar once wrote, *“Jesus Christ makes only three promises to those who would follow him:*

- that they will be filled with purpose*
- that they will be deliriously happy,*
- and that they will always be in trouble.*

So – FINALLY – I love you. May you be filled with purpose and may you always be deliriously happy. May we always love and follow Christ on our journeys. But if you do, remember to put on the whole armor of God because you'll always be in trouble.

Sermon preached by Reverend Dr. Stephen Savides at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
on Sunday, June 19, 2022 at 9:30 AM