


**ST. STEPHEN'S**  
**ANGLICAN CHURCH**  
 11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Twenty First Sunday After Trinity, November 10<sup>st</sup> 2019

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
 and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

*"My bretheren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."*

That's the opening three verses of today's Epistle. It's powerful stuff, that! St. Paul was writing to the newly-founded Christian Community at Ephesus in Asia Minor, but his words are just as applicable to Christians today.

Ephesians is a seminal work of theology. In it, St. Paul defines the nature of the Church Catholic and the duties and obligations of its members as Christ's spiritual warriors.

It was intended to put courage and backbone into a church that was under physical and spiritual assault. The Ephesian Christians were physically persecuted both by the pagan population and by the Jews. At the same time, its faith was under direct attack by teachers who called themselves Christian, but who, in fact, taught a very different Gospel from that of Jesus Christ

Ephesus' pagan businessmen persecuted the Christian community because it was in their economic interests to do so. The rapidly-growing church was undermining the pagan tourist trade on which the business community's prosperity depended. Ephesus' big attraction was the Temple of the goddess Artemis, Diana to the Romans. It was the Disney world of the Roman Empire – except the entertainment it offered was less wholesome than Walt's.

The Ephesian silversmiths also made vast profits from souvenir pins showing the temple on one side and the image of the goddess on the reverse. To Christians this was idolatry and this cut heavily into their profits. In fact, when Paul first came to Ephesus, the silversmiths stirred up a riot, and from then on they regarded the Church with bitter hatred.

Ephesian Jews regarded the church with equal loathing. While Christianity was Jewish in origin, it treated Jews and gentiles as equals. This angered folks who, as the Chosen People, believed themselves especially beloved of God. And the establishment in Christ of a New Covenant between God and the entire human race dashed Jewish hopes of a military Messiah who would conquer the Holy Land – even the world – on their behalf.

The physical forces confronting the new Church were greed, which, coupled with envy and pride, are about as explosive a mixture as it's possible to imagine. And the situation was made all the more volatile by the fact that the Christian community itself was deeply divided.

Following Paul's departure, teachers had turned up, all claiming to be Jesus' disciples and associates of His apostles. But instead of Jesus' all-embracing message, they taught that to become a Christian, one first had to become Jewish; that salvation did not come through God's grace alone, but by observing the intricate 613 Jewish religious laws.

Others claimed the Gospel was much more mysterious than Paul's teachings and that Christians needed a vast body of extra knowledge in order to be saved. They dwelt so heavily on the importance of the secret mystical knowledge they imparted, they became

known as "Gnostics" – a name derived from the word "gnosis," Greek for "knowledge."

The extraordinary thing about all this is that the situation that confronted the Christians at Ephesus, almost 2,000 years ago is exactly the same as the situation that confronts American Christians today. Christians here are under assault from the same sort of forces that attacked the Ephesian Church.

The motives for hating Jesus' teachings – pleasure, money and power – are no different from those at work 2,000 years ago. And like the enemies of the faith in the Ephesus business community, Christianity's enemies in the American business community include some of the most powerful and influential people in the land.

With a few notable exceptions, the movers and shakers in America's entertainment business are no different from their counterparts in Ephesus. Hollywood peddles the same wares as the Ephesians who ran the temple's raunchy spectacles and entertainments. As in Ephesus, they are hit hard in the pocket by Christ's command that Christians treat their fellow men with the same respect and love that they have for themselves.

Similarly, the Christian message that there is only one God – almighty, all-knowing and eternal – and that God is love similarly undermined the vastly lucrative business of the Ephesian silversmiths. What follower of the One, true, loving God would buy a medallion exalting the worship of a vengeful, pagan harpy like Diana?

And what of the government? The Roman Government, as a matter of legal philosophy, sought to regulate all human activity. Not so different from our regulatory state today. Small wonder then, that the American regulatory state – like the Roman Government before it – finds itself increasingly at odds with a faith which teaches that a person's duty to God far outweighs a person's duty to the government.

The big difference between Ephesus of 2,000 years ago and America is that the believing Jewish Communities are now allies of Christians battling the "*principalities, the powers, the rulers of the darkness of this world, and spiritual wickedness in high places,*" But the religious enemies of the faith haven't

changed greatly. Our latter day Gnostics are the self-anointed intellectuals you find in our universities, embracing long discredited, arcane "isms" such as Marxism. They're also self-proclaimed Christians who claim the Bible doesn't really mean what it so clearly says it means; Christian leaders who redefine sin; who define deviancy down as Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan so colorfully put it.

If the situation seems dire, it felt the same way to the Ephesians. And, in their despair, they turned to Paul for counsel. His response was the Epistle to the Ephesians. In it he lays out not only God's game plan for Christians under attack from enemies, human and supernatural, but also God's matrix for the Christian Church – its Constitution, so to speak.

In Jesus Christ. God's original plan for the unity of creation has become a reality, he says. The two divisions of the Human race, Jews and Gentiles – once bitterly opposed – are blended into one body, with one head and God and Father of all.

Christian life, says Paul, must reflect this magnificent unity. Christian communities must be harmonious – in stark contrast to the heathen communities from which they spring. And harmony, he declares, springs from the virtues of truthfulness, temperance, generosity, honest application, loving kindness and a horror of impurity.

These define how we should relate to one another. The Church is a family not a collection of individuals, each pulling in his own direction. Harmony between Christians isn't simply a nice ideal. It's vital for the Church's survival. Christians are constantly locked in spiritual warfare with the hosts of wickedness and, thus, they simply cannot afford to be divided, off-guard or unarmed.

Of course we shall have theological differences – it's the human condition. But they must not be allowed to disguise our unifying commonality of purpose – that is the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the words of Benjamin Franklin: "We must all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately." *AMEN.*

***To the only true God our Saviour be glory and majesty, dominion and power, now of forever. AMEN***