

Sermon Title: A Thinking or a Being?  
Text: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13  
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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI  
Third Sunday of Lent

I am not by any stretch of the imagination an expert on Harry Potter. In fact, I'm a little embarrassed to admit that I've not read *any* of the books. But I live in a family of two die-hard fans, and so I have seen the movies—only, I would add, after solemn promises that I would not be a stuffy curmudgeon about it all. So I've got “Harry Lite” in my mind, and in the film there was one thing Harry had that I have longed for since I was a child: a cloak of invisibility.

Maybe it's because I grew up in a house with four bedrooms and one bath, four brothers and one sister. Privacy was at a premium, and so most of my earliest memories revolve around trying to carve out spaces where I could be *alone*. I made “forts” out of blankets and chairs, found corners in the basement or garage, and sought out open spaces in the midst of the bramble of bushes in the corner of the yard and on the parkway where I could secret myself away, and live in a world where no one knew I was there.

I don't think I was alone in the longing. One of the things that surprised me when I read the biography of C.S. Lewis, the Godfather of Harry Potter type literature, was that the wardrobe of *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* was just such a place for him, as well. He only had one brother, and a big house, but still there was that desire to wrap himself up in a way that would put the world at least at arm's length.

As such desire grows to adulthood, I wonder if it doesn't lodge itself in that corner of our lives labeled “religion.” I wonder if at least some part of what we look and long for when we gather in places like this is to find that cloak that we can wrap around ourselves that will make the world go away, and let us simply rest comfortably in the arms of a loving God.

There are times when you might even get there from the texts that we might read in the comfortable womb of this sanctuary. If the lectionary were to offer, “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens,” or “take my yoke upon you,” or even, as the choir sang “he leads me beside still waters” we might be able to think ourselves into a faith that offers just that comforting cloak—that fort, or fortress from which we are eternally protected from the ravages of the world. You might even get there from the words of Isaiah, which we put to use in the beginning of our worship this morning as our Call and confession. “Come to the waters...you who have no money, come, buy and eat! ...Eat what is good and delight yourself in rich food!” It's the Kingdom of Heaven as the *anti* diet—the cloak that covers a multitude of sins. It gives you what you want, and keeps the barking world at bay. And it's nice.

But such is *not* the *only* offering of our lectionary this morning. There's also Paul, who as he sometimes does, rains on the parade, with a cold, and bitter rain.

Paul was writing to a fractious community that was forming itself into a church, and one of the things he found most troubling was a group that's come to us through the ages under the daunting name of “the antinomians”—literally those “without laws.” It was folk like these who were more or less convinced that in becoming Christian they had in some way thrown not just a

cloak of invisibility, but a cloak of invincibility over themselves. There was literally nothing they could do *wrong* once they'd accepted Jesus and been baptized. "Believing" wasn't just good enough, it was all that mattered, and once you got the believing right, you could just about *do* as you pleased.

It mustn't have sounded all that crazy to the church in its earliest centuries, because the emperor Constantine, who did as much as anyone to shape Christianity as it has come to us in its worldly form, delayed his baptism until his dying moments, convinced that so long as he managed not to do anything terribly wrong between his baptism and his death, his way would be clear to heaven.

But Paul had a problem with such construals of faith, and it came right out of the pages of Holy Scripture that he had learned at the foot of Gamaliel. God had extended the promises of faith to people before—claimed them as God's very own, made covenant: I will be your God, and you will be my people. But Paul knew all too well that even the promise of God on High could not protect the people from themselves. They became quarrelsome, and resistant to the promise. They wanted to play by their own rules, and not the ones God had sent down. And the result, God knows, was horrific. Not just those who perished in the wilderness, felled by God's wrath, succumbed by a wave of serpents. Even after Solomon had built his sanctuary to the Lord in Jerusalem, and the Ark of the Covenant rested comfortably in its walls, there was no cloak that protected them. Jerusalem fell, and the temple was destroyed; its holy vessels carried away as museum pieces of a dead faith. Because thinking you're safely ensconced in the pocket of God won't do it. This faith which worked its way into this world through the long story of that chosen nation, and burst open in Jesus of Nazareth is not one that wraps you up and takes you gently out of this world. It braces you, so that you can meet that world head on.

No one spoke about this all more eloquently than William Sloan Coffin. "Too many people" he wrote, "make faith their aim. They think 'the greatest of these' is faith." Elsewhere he clarifies: "I believe God dwells in those who make love their aim. And there is no sentimentality in this love; it is not endlessly pliable, always yielding. Prophets from Amos to Isaiah to Ghandi and King have shown how frequently compassion demands confrontation. Love without criticism is a kind of betrayal. Lying is done with silence as well as words. And always the love that is of God lies on the far side of justice, never on the near side." The eyes of faith don't find a way to look beyond or away from the world; past it, freed from it. Were that so this story of passion that we are living toward in our Lenten journey—a story of betrayal and denial, of trial and crucifixion are beyond pointless; they're sadistic! The eyes of faith look directly into the world. The temple curtain that divides the sacred from the profane is torn in half when Jesus yields his Spirit on the cross! There is no cloak to hide us from the world, or the world from us, but only that voice that calls to us from *outside* the tomb, and meets us along the road, and is known to us when bread is broken with a stranger.

This is Offering of Letters Sunday, and I am sensitive to the fact that some are uncomfortable, though it is something we've been about as a congregation for 28 years, still I realize for some it raises doubts. Should we do something so political as writing a letter to congress as an act of worship? And this year especially, as I've tried hard to come to an understanding of the very complex issues that we're asked to consider as we write. I'm the furthest you will ever get from an expert on federal farm policy, but I've learned in the last two weeks that like most things that

are important, it's not simple. You can't just throw a one-size fits all cloak over it, or reduce the questions to a simple yes or no. It's messy, and hard, and my heart longs for neat and simple. It's tempting to pull that cloak tight around us, and insist that this is stuff "of the world" and not "of the spirit."

But the Word reminds me this morning that "neat" and "simple" are a vocabulary *I* impose on the faith Jesus taught and Paul commended. It's not a faith that can leave the world at our doorstep, but one that is worked out in that world. That sword falls on both sides, of course. There is an equal danger, of which the Presbyterian church has been painfully susceptible, to try and make the world's complex problems yield to simple solutions—to imagine ourselves to be the authority on matters beyond our competence. But the opposite danger does not negate the responsibility. Our faith *has* a word to speak to the world around us. It is not lived in the quiet walls of a sanctuary, content to say the right words to each other, and assure each other that it is well with our souls. It is a faith that is tested and tried in the world we live in, whenever we go to the grocery store, write a check, read the newspaper, fill our gas tank, and yes, write a letter to a member of congress.

You see, if there is a core message to this Lenten journey we are on, it is that simple message we all learned by heart in Sunday School: "God so loved the world that he sent his only son" sent him *in* to that world, "that whosoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life." And you know it doesn't end there, wrapped comfortably in the cloak of eternity. God's saving act was not to draw us out of a sinful world but to send the Son into it. And the purpose of that presence in the world is not to condemn, but to bring life in its fullness. The gift of faith is not ours so we can hide under the covers until the storm is past. It is entrusted to us, as it was to Jesus, so that we may bring good news to the poor, and release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, and to proclaim the year of God's favor. It's not a thinking. It's not a *believing* that saves us. It is a *life* lived in this world, and the words spoken most by that lived presence of God was "follow me". Not out of the world, not away from all controversy, not to the realm of the Spirit, not to our quiet hiding places, but there, with fear and trembling, into the creation God loves so dearly that even death will not deter his saving work.

So I've written a letter to my Representative, as an act of faith. It's a busy morning for me, so I wrote it before the service, but I thought it might be good to share it to you, as an example of what this might look like in my mind. It goes like this:

*Dear Rep. Kagen,*

*I write this morning as a part of Memorial Presbyterian Church's 28<sup>th</sup> Offering of Letters, sponsored by Bread for the World, focusing this year on the Farm Bill.*

*Yesterday, I ate bananas and blackberries, shrimp and artichoke, almost without a thought. I am blessed to live in a world in which I can have just about anything I want, if I can afford it. But I know well that the great majority of our world's population will be satisfied by a bowl of rice, some beans—a far more humble diet.*

*As you consider the Farm Bill in committee and in the House, my sincere prayer is that you keep those who have the least at the forefront of your thinking—that we not, as a nation, endanger those who have little for the benefit of those, like me, who have all, and more than we need.*

*As always, I write with prayers for you, your colleagues, and our nation, that our greatness be measured not in might, but in compassion.*

*Sincerely,*

*The Rev. Dr. Charles Valenti-Hein*

Whatever you may choose to do with pen and paper this morning, know that the authentic call of faith is never a retreat, but an engagement with that world. Let Bill Coffin have the last word: “To believe you can approach transcendence without drawing nearer in compassion to suffering humanity is to fool yourself. There can be no genuine personal religious conversion without a change in social attitude.”

Let us pray.