

A Head Seeking Arms

All Saints Sunday
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

8:15 and 11:00 a.m. Sunday, November 7, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Ephesians 1: 11-23

I don't know about you, but when I pick up a newspaper to read it, I scan the headlines before reading an article to see if I'm interested in what is being reported. Not every story interests me. But with my crazy sense of humor, sometimes a headline will make me think of an unintended meaning. Here are a few examples I've been collecting recently.

"Red Tape Holds Up New Bridge." Maybe someone from the state could get a hold of some of that for the new bridges here on 11 and 15.

Or, how about: "Local High School Dropouts Cut in Half." That seemed a mite drastic to me, but I'm no educator. They might know best how to curb the dropout rate.

Here's one from West Virginia: "Miners Refuse to Work After Death." Oh, this new generation. A bunch of slackers if you ask me.

Two more, which are my favorites. "Typhoon Rips through Cemetery; Hundreds Dead." Makes you wonder what they expected, doesn't it?

And this one, a headline that came out right before the fall of Saddam Hussein: "Iraqi Head Seeks Arms." In light of what we know of the fallen dictator, it seems to me that he should have followed Dorothy on the yellow brick road to find a brain, rather than arms.

Well, believe it or not, it was that last absurd headline that I was reminded of when I read our second lesson for today from the book of Ephesians. Did you hear the last sentence: "He (God) has put all things under his feet and has made him (Jesus) the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." Jesus is our head, and he seeks arms for his body – that's us, the church.

Before I try to explicate this a little further, a few words about Ephesians and Ephesus are in order. Are you familiar with the many books on the market these days under the titles of "So-and-so for Dummies?" John Kilcullen got the idea for a series of books that would be sort of self-help books for folks who want to learn about a particular topic. There's *Golf for Dummies*, *Investing for Dummies*, *Philosophy for Dummies*, *Bridge for Dummies*, just to name a few. The books aren't for dummies at all, but it is a catchy title, and in fact, there are over 400 titles in the product line written in over 31 languages.

Well, someone brighter than me has suggested that the book of Ephesians could be subtitled, *Church for Dummies*, because as you read this book, also called the "Queen of the Epistle's," that's really what the letter is all about: what the church is and what it is supposed to do.

I had the privilege of visiting Ephesus on two trips to that part of the world. Anyone who has ever been there will tell you that it is a magnificent archeological site, and I can just imagine that in its prime, it was a magnificent city. Located on the coast of Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, it was a cultural and commercial center. The most prominent monument in the city was the temple to honor the Roman god Artemis. It was huge, and impressive. But the writer of the letter of Ephesians wanted the Christians located there, clearly in the minority, to know that the church really isn't about a building. It's a body. And the head of this body is Jesus the Christ. He is the Head seeking arms.

Since this is one of the disputed letters of Paul, but since it's easier to just call the author Paul, I'll just do that, to save having to qualify every statement, and draw our attention to the beginning of this fine letter. Paul begins, as he does most of his epistles, with a note of gratitude: "Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers."

Today, we are this body – the saints of God. And giving thanks for one another is always appropriate. I give thanks every day for the opportunities to serve the Gospel in this place, with and among you. I give thanks regularly for the saints who surround the ministry of this church and keep it vital and growing. And today, because it is the first Sunday of November, we give thanks for the saints who have entered the church triumphant in this past year. We thank God for their lives, their witness, their example, and their ongoing support as they join us around the table whenever the community of faith, both visible and invisible, gathers for worship.

And we need to remember that saints aren't perfect people. They are not those who have attained a level of life above the ordinary, as some folks misconceive. They are not those who have lived a perfect life in harmony with God. There are no such folks – not now, not ever.

Even a cursory glance through the pages of scripture reveals that truth. Abraham, the so-called "Father of the Faith," had so little faith one time in his life that he passed his beautiful wife off as his sister so that he wouldn't get his throat slit by the king who fancied her. Moses, the great lawgiver, started off his career by murdering an Egyptian. David, the greatest of Israel's kings, arranged to have an officer killed in battle so he could marry the man's wife. Samson – well, you know about Delilah. And the great prophet Jeremiah kept complaining to God that he was too young, too old, too tired, too depressed, too isolated to be much of a spokesperson for God.

That's not exactly the fabric of saint's material if our understanding of saints has to do with earthly perfection. The picture in the New Testament isn't any better either. There we see Paul the persecutor, Mary the prodder, Peter the denier, Martha the controller, Thomas the doubter, and James the uptight. They may look holy in stained glass, but up close they look amazingly like the rest of us.

No, we are the arms of God – no matter how frail, feeble, weak, deformed, unwilling at times, or imperfect. We are the arms of God that Christ has sought to be his church. Saints – all of us; the living saints who seek to serve in the body of Christ now, and the departed saints, whose witness and lives we remember with love and respect this day.

Let me add one more image of saint to play with in our minds-eye this morning. It comes from Frederick Buechner, pastor and author. He offers this rather poetic definition: "In his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints."

Here is the image of God, the lover, shy and proper, who seeks the world's attention, and ultimately our affection, by dropping into our world something that carries the whiff and aroma of God's perfume. We can't help but take notice. We experience God through these handkerchiefs.

But this rather quaint image takes on another dimension entirely when you watch a person doing sign language interpret Buechner's definition. The sign for "handkerchief" is passing the hand across the face as though wiping one's face and nose. The Victorian image of the lover is now rather crassly embellished with the picture of saints like us in all our human forms going about the business of living in the sweat and heat and dust of this world. The tears of a Moses for his people, the cries of a Mother Teresa for the sick children of the world, the runny nose of one who toils endlessly on behalf of others, the tears we shed over the pains of this world, our cries of anguish amidst the things we cannot understand, and the blood of those who fight for peace and justice – those stained handkerchiefs give witness to Christ's body in the real world. And today we lift up those soiled handkerchiefs, our own lives even, in grateful thanks and praise, asking our God to make us a fragrance, however dirty and tear-stained, however bloody and rumpled, to make of us his church, the fragrance of God's love and caring in this world.

AMEN.