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I was very blessed to spend a few days in Maine with a couple of old friends from seminary this past week. The weather was great, but mostly just to be able to have the opportunity to hang out with some wonderful guys I've known now for over 40 years, it was truly lovely. But I heard a person on Vermont Public Radio a couple of weeks ago talking about coming home to Vermont, she said, "When we would drive up I 91 and pass the sign that says, 'Welcome to Vermont' we knew we were home!" I have had that experience many times now, and even after a few days away, once more as I crossed over the Connecticut River, I had that same sense again, it is good to be back home!

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, we hear your call to us this day to prayer; may our hearts and spirits be strengthened in prayer to follow in you loving ways. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

The past few weeks we have heard lessons from the Letter to the Ephesians. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, there are passages in this scripture that I find quite profound, like the musings on being angry, but not letting the sun go down on our anger. But there are also other passages that get my dander up; and today we heard one of them read. The metaphor the writer employs about the whole armor of God has driven me nuts for years. While I quite appreciate that as Christians we stand in a deep need for truth, righteousness, a readiness to proclaim the gospel of peace, faith, salvation and the Spirit, to put this need in these military terms simply rubs me the wrong way. Yes, I understand that the times in which this letter was written was a time of war and conquest, in the midst of a society that was certainly over militarized and which gave a full throated acclamation of its military prowess. And of course, that is not so different from our own times. But to the nature of Christian faith, for us as followers of the one we call the Prince of Peace, this militaristic metaphor seems completely misplaced to me. Like I said, it just rubs me the wrong way.

Yet, as much as this makes me want to dismiss and disregard the Letter to the Ephesians, the very next sentence pulls me right back: "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication." Just like that verse from First Thessalonians I often quote as an offertory sentence, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you," this verse from Ephesians, "Pray in the Spirit at all times," just hits a fundamental chord in my soul. That prayer is to be just so much a part of life - like our breath, each

moment in the deep awareness of God's Spirit of love surrounding us constantly. But of course, life too often rudely intrudes - impossible to keep that prayerful orientation going all the time. No matter how hard I try, no matter knowing the importance, it still eludes us. Now some Christians, especially some pastors and evangelists have sought to bring that martial discipline to prayer, perhaps influenced by these military metaphors from Ephesians, seeking to build up "Prayer warriors" those who would go forth in prayer as a spiritual combat. Certainly that attitude seems to be implied in this passage from Ephesians. But such a combative approach to prayer and our spiritual efforts just seems out of place as well. Yes, there is a struggle that lies ahead of us, but it is mostly a struggle with our own selves, to find the ways to pattern our lives influenced by Jesus' teachings, and not a combat with others. I believe, and I think many would agree, that we have had much too much of this in our day.

Perhaps the way out of this dilemma is to look a little further ahead in this passage: the writer speaks of the desire to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel. I find myself intrigued by that phrase: "the mystery of the gospel." On the one hand, it is not mysterious at all, this good news is that God loves us and has given God's own self for us, fully bring the divine life of love to us and lifting us into the fullness of that love. But on the other hand, what an unknowable, what a mind blowing, what an absolutely unimaginable thing, that God would love us, that God would give so freely to us, sharing with us such amazing grace. And then the passage goes on to mention that, "I am an ambassador in chains" because of this good news. Now Paul the apostle, of course, was imprisoned several times during his missionary activities, and the writer of Ephesians is either assuming this identity or perhaps also a prisoner as Paul was, however in either case, it is that sense of captivity here that I believe points to a deeper understanding: both the mystery of the gospel, that never failing love, that steadfast love of God is utterly captivating for us, and of course, we are still captives of our lives, struggling against the the distractions that keep us from living in the fullness of God's love, those ways in which we put ourselves first and cannot even see the depth of God's loving kindness.

But God calls us together in prayer, God calls us to gather in unity, as we prayed at the opening of this worship service, gathering us together in the power of God's Spirit of love. We gather together around this Altar, once more to be nourished and strengthened in Christ. Most importantly, we gather first in peace, proclaiming the peace of Christ that is among us, that deep peace through which we can reach deep into our souls in prayer,

that deep peace that calls out to be shared in our community and in our world. This is the way God opens for us to indeed pray in the Spirit at all times, this is indeed how Christ is part of every prayer and supplication, that place where we marvel at this mystery of the good news that God loves us fully, just as fully as we need to be loved. Here, the amazing grace of God takes root in our lives, takes root in our souls, here we are also called to declare this love in our actions and even in our words if needed. Today my friends, today we can pray together that in the days to come this prayer will continue in our breath, in our spirits, in our souls. Thanks be to God for this amazing grace, the gracious gift of love and thanks be to Christ for calling us into this way of love. Amen.