

The Whole Armor of God

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Ephesians 6:10-17

Our passage this morning appears near the very end of Paul's letter to the believers at Ephesus. The first half of the epistle invites praise and thanksgiving to God for salvation and for unity in Christ. The second half encourages readers to persevere in the social and personal dimensions of their new life in Christ. The first readers of the letter were trying to find a way to live out a particular truth in a pluralistic culture. That alone makes this book important for us today. In addition, Ephesus was a shining star within ancient Asian Minor. Its popular seaport, thriving economy and strategic military location made it a model city for displaying the powers of Roman citizenry. All of this raised an important question for the church in Ephesus, one we are not unfamiliar with today: "How do we live faithfully amidst the trappings of the military and economic power of Empire?" Paul doesn't answer the question with concrete details, but instead, in this morning's passage in particular, places the question in the broader context of spiritual struggle and spiritual formation.

"Our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual wickedness in high places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm" (6:12-13). Although the imagery of armor may offend our nonviolent sensibilities, Paul is certainly not presenting a militaristic solution to this struggle.

In fact, the armor imagery very likely brought to mind for the readers and hearers of this epistle something else. First century Cynics and Stoics often used the imagery of armor to describe their fight against the soft life, easy living and other forms of cultural imprisonment. Words, reason and virtue were their chosen armor of battle, and that's how they sometimes described it—as their armor.

Also, for those Ephesians who were aware of the Old Testament, Isaiah is filled with the same images Paul uses: the belt, breastplate, military sandals, shield, helmet and sword and meant nearly the same thing as for Paul, something, as we will see, quite contrary to armed weapons.

In our scripture today, Paul makes three claims. First he emphasizes that we are engaged not in a battle against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers in high places. Second, the posture of our engagement should be to stand strong and firm against evil. Finally, the tools of our engagement are the full armor of God.

The Ephesian Christians may very well have viewed the presence of evil in the propensity for individual sin, and Paul countered by arguing that evil's presence and power also goes deeper into institutions and groups and organizations and ideologies. That confusion affects many Christians in the United States today. In a recent letter to the editor in *The Mennonite*, a man wrote: *"I really wanted to support our Christian president so I allowed a few minor missteps, including: pulling out of environmental agreements after saying he would not as a candidate; leaking only the scant intelligence in support of the invasion of Iraq; flying home Easter to sign legislation to invade the Shiavo family's privacy, but then continuing to vacation during the beginning of Hurricane Katrina; ignoring U.S. laws against torture and eavesdropping on American citizens without warrants...but now this man has the nerve to swear and not even apologize for it. I am completely disgusted and will never support him or his friends again. How did I get fooled so long that he was sincere in his Christian faith?"* Probably because he didn't understand what Paul is saying here in Ephesians, chapter six. I am not trying to disparage or ridicule this person. Not seeing the deeper residence of evil in our world is something many of us miss, and there are no doubt things that I'm blind to, too.

According to William Stringfellow, *"the realities to which the biblical term principalities and powers refer are quite familiar to modern society, though they may be called by different names. What the Bible calls*

principalities and powers are called in contemporary language ideologies, institutions, and images." Examples of these entities include racism, nationalism, globalism, fascism and democracy. Religious institutions, including the Mennonite Church USA and Hyattsville Mennonite Church, are also principalities and powers. John Howard Yoder, in the *Politics of Jesus* and elsewhere, spoke of the principalities in terms of structures: religious structures; intellectual structures (the "ologies" and "isms"); moral structures (codes and customs) and political structures. But in whatever categories you describe them, a principality or power, whatever its particular form or variety, is a living reality, distinguishable from human and other organic life. Each has a life of its own. So Paul urges the Ephesian Christians to go deeper and be more cosmic in how they view the presence of evil and how they engage it in spiritual battle.

He also tells them this is not a battle for the faint and weak-hearted. Their posture of engagement is to stand strong, to stand firm. Five times in four verses he says it: "*Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power*" (6:10). "*...Stand against the wiles of the devil*" (6:12). "*...Be able to withstand evil on that day...to stand firm*" (6:13). "*Stand therefore...*" (6:14).

And the reason they can stand strong is that God will stand with them. "*Take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm*" (6:13). The tools of engagement are the full armor of God. "*Put on the whole armor of God*" (6:11) Paul stresses.

What is the whole armor of God? Paul lists its numerous parts. "*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. With all of these, take the shield of faith...take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*" (6:14-17). And then he adds: "*Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert...*"(6:18). Truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God and

prayer—these are the tools of engagement in the spiritual battle against the principalities and powers. These are what we wear in our trenches of spiritual battle.

One person who fought in the trenches of spiritual warfare most of her life is Fannie Lou Hamer. Hamer was born in Montgomery County, Mississippi in 1917 and she died in Ruleville, Mississippi sixty years later. She was one of the heroes of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Her family lost their home as a plantation worker in 1962 and her husband lost his job because she tried to register to vote. In 1963 she succeeded in registering but was subsequently jailed and beaten, suffering kidney damage and developing a blood clot over her left eye that permanently impaired her vision. At the Democratic National Convention in 1964 she spearheaded the challenge to the all-white Mississippi delegation and later, in both 1968 and 1972 Democratic conventions, she was actually seated as a delegate.

Hamer was poor and unlettered and walked with a limp, but she had a remarkable memory and could quote at length many passages from the Bible. And, she could sing powerfully, though she never had a singing lesson in her life. I'm told her voice was big and husky and had a range somewhere between contralto and bass. Her signature tune was "This Little Light of Mine" and she sang it every time she spoke to a crowd, which was often. Her favorite verse was, "All over Mississippi, I'm gonna let it shine. Yes, all over Mississippi, I'm gonna let it shine. All over Mississippi, I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine."

As her political understanding grew, she went beyond racism and she became an early opponent of the Vietnam War. She also saw the civil rights movement's struggle as not solely about black legal rights but as a fight for all human beings in conflict with a system whose leaders were, as she put it, *"more interested in more profits and power for the rich and powerful people...and have no interest in helping the poor people."* Forty years later, nothing has changed and her voice is prophecy for us today.

But while Hamer's political understanding grew, it remained firmly rooted in biblical faith. In 1968 she wrote: "*We have to realize just how grave the problem is in the United States today [and I would add "today, too"], and I think the sixth chapter of Ephesians, the eleventh and twelfth verses help us to know...what we are up against. It says: 'Put on the whole armor 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 darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.'* This is what I think about when I think of my own work in the fight for freedom."

And then once, during a time of unusually frequent threats and harassment, Hamer said, "*I'm never sure any more when I leave home whether I'll get back or not. Sometimes it seems like to tell the truth today is to run the risk of being killed. But if I fall, I'll fall five feet four inches forward in the fight for freedom.*" Fannie Lou Hamer understood what Paul was talking about in Ephesians 6:10-18. She knew that we are up against more than flesh and blood. She knew the need to take a firm and determined stand. And she knew she needed the whole armor of God—truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation and the word of God. And prayer.

Like the Ephesians and like Fannie Lou Hamer, we also struggle with the same spiritual battle. As I have thought about this whole armor of God the last couple of weeks, I think a lot of that armor is in pretty good place on most of us. Truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith and salvation all seem pretty strong—plenty of room for improvement to be sure—but pretty strong. It's the word of God and prayer that I'm not as sure of.

Walter Wink puts an angle on understanding the whole armor of God that I haven't thought of before. He once wrote, "*Those of us engaged in struggles for social justice have been incredibly naïve about what has been happening in our own psyches. The impatience of some activists with prayer, meditation and inner healing may itself represent an inchoate*

knowledge of what they might find if they looked within. For the struggle against evil makes us evil, and no amount of good intentions can prevent its happening. The whole armor of God that Paul counsels us to put on [in Ephesians 6] is crafted specifically to protect us against that contagion of evil within our own souls, and its metals are all annealed in prayer."

If Wink is right, and I suspect he is, our battle is not just with evil out there but also with the evil out there that penetrates our own souls, our own psyches, even as we engage in spiritual battle against it. That's where being steeped in the word of God and in prayer is especially critical.

William Stringfellow writes about the role of the word of God this way: *"Confront the noise and verbiage and falsehood of death with the truth and the potency and efficacy of the Word of God...And more than that, in the Word of God, expose death and all death's works and wiles, rebuke lies, cast out demons, cleanse the possessed and raise those who are dead in mind and conscience."* And I would add, maybe even in the process raising the dead within us as well. Part of the spiritual battle is to appropriate the sword of the Spirit, as Paul calls it, the word of God. How deeply do we know the word of God and use the word of God as we engage the principalities and powers?

And Walter Wink also offers these, I think, helpful words about prayer. He writes, *"Are we not often unconsciously attracted to the very evils we most stridently denounce? Is not our very intensity against evil a dangerous sign that it fascinates us? The very sight of evil kindles evil in the soul, wrote Jung. 'Even a saint,' Jung noted, 'would have to pray unceasingly for the soul of Hitler and Himmler, the Gestapo and the SS, in order to repair without delay the damage done to his soul.'* Wink then concluded, *"No one can escape this, for we are all so much a part of the human community that every crime elicits a secret fascination in some corner of our hearts."* Unceasing prayer is another part of our spiritual struggle with the principalities and powers, or as Paul put it, *"pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end be alert."*

Truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation and—maybe most importantly for us—the word of God and prayer all constitute the whole of armor of God. The word of God to us this morning, I believe, is to wear it all as we daily engage the spiritual battle against wickedness in high places and even within ourselves.