

Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity: Ephesians 6:10–20

William Cwirla

Preached for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

Today is the 8th and last in our sermon series on Paul's circular letter to the Ephesian congregation. We've come a long way. From the "cosmic Christ" and Paul's remarkable statement that God has "recapitulated" everything in heaven and earth in the crucified and risen body of Jesus, to our own election in Christ, to our being made alive in Christ even as we are dead in sin, to how we are to live, to grow into maturity in Christ, to leave the works of darkness behind us, and to strive to become who we already are in Jesus.

And now we finally come to the apostles' "finally." The last word from Paul, a prisoner of the Roman government, to the church in Ephesus and the surrounding churches of Asia minor. Paul loved this congregation. Before he sent to Jerusalem, he specifically sent for the elders from Ephesus. In a few decades, Ephesus and her sister congregations would be under extreme pressure. In the Revelation, the congregation in Ephesus is the doctrinally pure church whose love has grown cold. Loveless dogmatic purity is always a danger in the church including our own today. You can be right in all the wrong ways. Paul knew what they were up against, he knew the enemy. And so he writes: Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His strength.

He doesn't just say, "Be strong." Their own strength means nothing. Their strength is in the Lord. Their power is His power, a power perfected in weakness, the power of the cross and the open tomb. That was their strength, and ours too. Left to our own devices, abilities, methods, we're doomed. It's only in the strength of the Lord that we can "be strong."

We need to be clothed, too. Not in the latest fashions of the culture, but as a soldier of the Crucified. You can imagine the apostle Paul, sitting in his prison cell, or perhaps under house arrest in a small apartment somewhere, with the ever-present Roman guard standing there beside him. I'm sure Paul spoke with his guard, and if the book of Acts is any indicator, probably evangelized him. For Paul, every situation was an opportunity to proclaim salvation

in Jesus. He looks the soldier's uniform, and through His Christ-centered vision, he sees a picture of the baptized believer dressed in the gifts of Christ.

The image of the believer as a soldier in Christ's army is an old one. The church fathers loved it. We have it in the hymn Lift High the Cross: "All newborn soldiers of the Crucified, bear on their brows the seal of Him who died." The soldiers in Caesar's army had a mark, a tattoo, on their foreheads, meaning their life belonged to Caesar. Christians too bear the mark of their Master, the sign of the cross by which sin and death and defeated, the "seal of Him who died." You belong to Christ; you are His footsoldier.

A soldier needs to know the enemy. Paul says our struggle is not against "blood and flesh." I like how he inverts "flesh and blood" to "blood and flesh." You don't see that because translators are always trying to improve on the apostle and the Holy Spirit. "Blood and flesh" drives home the point that we're not fighting our fellow human beings. The enemy is not people – not atheists, Muslims, liberals, conservatives, whatever. Remember, Christ died for all people inclusively without exception. Christ embraced all of humanity in His death. That was Paul's whole point in chapter 1. There is no one for whom Christ did not die. Our battle is with the forces of darkness, the devil and his demons, the "powers and principalities" as Paul calls them. This is a spiritual battle, fought with weapons of the Holy Spirit.

For this reason, you need spiritual armor, the "whole armor of God." The word Paul uses is panoplian, panoply. It's in our English dictionary. I checked. The whole and complete armor of God. Without it, you cannot withstand the powers that are aligned against you. Don't even try. "On earth is not his equal," Luther sang of the devil. He wasn't kidding. Someone once said, "He who dines with the devil needs a long spoon." Better not to come to the table at all. We're no match for the powers and principalities Paul is talking about. You need all the protection you can get.

Stand with the truth tied around your waist like a belt. If you wade out into a fast moving stream to rescue someone, you need to tie yourself off to a lifeline. When you got ready for vigorous action, you tied a belt around your waist so you wouldn't trip over your robes. Truth is the belt of God's panoply. Truth is the foundation of our faith. Jesus is the Truth Incarnate. God's Word is truth. God's people speak the truth. You know the truth – that your sins are forgiven in the death of Christ and you live in His life. That's the truth, a truth in which you can stand firm.

Truth is in short supply these days. The phrase “truth in government” draws cynical chuckles. The courts claim to have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but we all know better. In the hands of our culture, truth is political putty, maleable, a point of view, an opinion poll. We can’t seem to pin down the truth on much of anything. Pilate still asks “What is truth?” and there isn’t a clear answer coming. But by God’s grace, you know the truth; His name is Jesus. You know the truth of God’s love, His forgiveness, His mercy in Jesus. Tie it around your waist. It’s your lifeline.

You need body armor, spiritual Kevlar, a bullet proof vest. That’s the breastplate of Jesus’ righteousness, His gift to you in your Baptism. You have been clothed with Christ. Listen carefully. Jesus kept the Law perfectly in your place. Every single commandment, not only the letter but also the spirit of every command of God. And that perfect life under the law is yours, gratis, as a gift. He became your sin in His death, so that in Him you might become the righteousness of God. We’re like Jacob disguised as his older brother Esau, riding the coattails of our elder brother Jesus. His righteousness is your body armor. No charge can stick. “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Your feet need to be ready to move. Soldiers don’t stand still. Your shoes are the gospel of peace. “Blessed, happy are the feet of those who bring good news.” When we have good news we’re propelled, we want to run and tell others. The good news of the cross and the open, empty tomb mobilize our tired, aching feet. We have to run and tell others. The word “gospel” comes straight from the battlefield. When the fight was over and the battle won, they sent a runner to bring the gospel, the good news, back to the king. That’s how the marathon was invented. Phidipedes ran 26 miles to tell the king the gospel, the good news of victory. And then he dropped dead. Nice image.

Notice that the good news is the message of peace. Soldiers of the cross are not waging war, they’re waging peace. Their feet are propelled by good news from the Prince of Peace Himself. God is reconciled, at peace with the world, in the death of Jesus. The enemy is already defeated. The holy war was waged on Calvary, and won when Jesus died. It’s not as the old revival hymn said, “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war.” We’re on a peace march, telling the world to put down its arms. The fight is o’er, the battle won. Christ has conquered, and God is at peace.

Don’t forget your shield. You don’t want to get winged by stray arrows. The Roman shield was made of leather and could be soaked in water to extinguish flaming arrows. Your shield is the

shield of the faith. I say the faith because I don't think this refers to trust in the heart. You need something more solid and sure than faith in the heart. I think Paul is referring to the faith, the teaching, the doctrine of Christ. That's what repels the flaming arrows of the devil. When he accuses you or causes you to doubt, the faith repels his arrows.

That's why Luther found such comfort in the creed and had people pray it at least twice a day. That's why he always prayed the creed with the sick and the doubting. When you are caught in doubt, take up your shield, soaked in the water of your Baptism, and say those ancient, sturdy words that recall your Baptism: I believe in God, the Father almighty.... Going into the world without the church's creeds and confessions is like going into a battlefield without a shield. You don't stand a chance. Take up the faith once delivered to the saints, make it your own, confess it.

Put on the helmet of salvation. Your head needs protection. Wrap it in the salvation Christ has won for you. It's already yours, in your possession. Salvation isn't simply something coming later when we rise from the dead. Salvation is yours now, as we speak, something to be worn on your head, guarding your mind when your thoughts lead you astray. The cross is yours; the open tomb is yours. Sin and death are defeated. Christ has saved you. The battle is not over salvation; that's already been fought and won. The battle is over whether we will trust it, live in its freedom, proclaim it to others.

You need a weapon, a spiritual weapon. Remember, the battle is not with blood and flesh but with the power and principalities. The only weapon God puts into your hand is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Nothing but the Word. That's all we have to defend ourselves; it's all we need. The two-edged Word of the Law that convicts and the Gospel that comforts. You don't need political power, you don't need military might, you don't physical or even intellectual strength. "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," said the Lord through the prophet Zechariah. The Word is all you need. "One little Word can fell him," Luther said of the devil. One little Word of Christ can send the devil scurrying like a cockroach when the lights come on.

To take up the sword implies that you know how to use it. Be careful. Swords are sharp. This one can separate the inseparable – joint and marrow, soul and spirit. Learn the Word. Read it, mark it, learn it, digest it. Learn to use it carefully and responsibly. We have gun safety classes because weapons are dangerous. We ought to have Bible safety classes so no one gets hurt. Actually, we do. We call them Sunday school and catechism and bible class. And be careful

how you apply it – whether to yourself or others. It's a sword, and it's very sharp. It can kill, it can make alive.

There you have it: The panoply of God, the whole armor God provides and that you already have at your disposal: truth, righteousness, the good news of peace, the faith once delivered, salvation, the Word. Everything you need to withstand the powers of darkness. It's not exactly the most fashionable clothing in the fall collection of American religions, but it will be the only one standing on the last day.

So what do you do? What are the marching orders for a soldier of Christ? Paul lists only one activity: pray. Pray in the Spirit. Pray with all perseverance. Pray for all the saints, for your brothers and sisters in Christ, especially for those who live under the political beast of communism or the religious beast of Islam. Pray for our fellow believers in China, in Cambodia, Vietnam, in the middle east, in places like Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan. Pray for them all. Pray for your brothers and sisters in Christ in your congregation, especially those who are AWOL. Take the congregation's directory and pray for each person. I wonder what would happen in a congregation that intentionally prayed for each other?

Paul says, "Pray for me, that I may open my mouth with boldness and declare the mystery of the Gospel, the hidden good news that the world is reconciled in the death of Jesus." I would echo that request to you. Pray for me, your pastor. Pray that the word I preach and teach be God's Word. Pray that I have the courage to tell the truth, even if it means we suffer loss. Pray that I have the energy, the zeal, the boldness to speak the good news all over this community. And I pray the same for you – that you speak the truth of Jesus with boldness and courage wherever and whenever God gives you opportunity. You're His ambassador; you're His soldier – equipped, well-armed, well-defended. You're soldiers of peace in a world at war. Proclaim the peace of Jesus.

Paul ends his letter on a note of peace, love, and grace. I can hardly improve on his Spirit-ed words: Peace to you and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.

In the Name of Jesus,

Amen.

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), “Ephesians 6:10-20 (15 Pentecost B)”, posted 2003-09-14 (<https://htlcms.org/2003/09/ephesians-610-20-15-pentecost-b/>).