

“Peace Shoes”
Ephesians 6: 10 – 17
Makemie Presbyterian Church
September 6, 2009

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¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

¹³Therefore 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.

¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

This ends the reading.

I love this passage of Scripture: fasten your belt, put on your breastplate, take your shield, put your helmet on, pick up your sword, stick your tootsies into peace shoes, just “the whole armor of God.” I love it. And I love the old hymn “Onward Christians Soldiers” that we just sang.

But it is a mixed message isn't it?

A distinguished New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa, Professor at Princeton Seminary, wrote a commentary on this passage. She begins: “One may be somewhat put off by all the military imagery,” the allusions to violence & war. Now Prof. Gaventa is a fine scholar & teacher. She is also gentle.

But I think her beginning observation is wrong. Some aren't put off at all by the military & violent images. Some absolutely love it. Some love the notion of religion as a kind of warfare.

Last fall Jaxon & I were in Yorktown at the battlefield. It's where British General Cornwallis was defeated in 1781 by General Washington on land & General Lafayette on sea & led to the treaty of Paris in 1783. It was the decisive battle for our young country. So as students of our revolution we were inside the theatre in Yorktown, waiting for the movie of

this battle to begin. There was next to us an older grandparent couple.

Jaxon leaned over & whispered to the man, “I can’t wait to see this movie.”

The man said, “I can’t wait either.”

Jaxon said, “My mom’s a minister so she’s into peace, but I’m into war.”

“Put on the whole armor of God,” Paul wrote to the early Christian church in Ephesus during the last half of the first century. The people of Ephesus would have been used to seeing the helmets, breastplates, shields & swords of the Roman Legionnaires patrolling the streets of the city, marching thru to demonstrate authority & to keep public order. The passage also reflects a tiny church’s struggle to survive in an environment that was largely indifferent but which, at a moment’s notice, could become hostile. Paul thought that the church, representing the truth of the gospel, was in a war with hostile, cosmic forces, “spiritual forces of evil,” forces opposed to the reign of God. And his advice was to take it seriously & to do battle with an arsenal, an alternate arsenal. We miss this part mostly. The alternate arsenal is truth, righteousness, peace, faith, the word of God. The belt he urged them to put around their waist was truth; the breastplate, righteousness. It’s a skillful & eloquent exercise in metaphor.

Except the fact that the Christian church has often eagerly become allied with actual military power. It began in 312, during a war between two Roman generals, each of whom claimed to be the emperor: Constantine, son of the emperor who had died & Maxentius, son of the former emperor's predecessor. Constantine's army was encamped at the Milvian Bridge, on the outskirts of Rome. On the evening of October 27, as the armies prepared for battle, Constantine had a vision: the cross & the words "In this sign conquer." He ordered his troops to paint the cross on their shields & the next day, they prevailed, capturing & killing thousands of Maxentius's troops.

Until that time, Christianity had been an underground movement, an outlaw sect, worshiping in secret, frequently persecuted by the state. But after the Battle of Milvian Bridge, the new emperor, Constantine, ended the persecution & ruled that it was no longer illegal to be a Christian & follow Jesus. He was baptized on his deathbed & his successor, Theodosius, made Christianity the official religion of the empire. The cross became the official logo on Roman shields. And it wasn't long before victorious Roman legions were dunking defeated Barbarian tribes into the closest river for Christian baptism. Some

historians think that it was the worst thing that could have happened to Christianity.

Christian pacifists look at scripture, the words and life of Jesus & conclude that Christianity is essentially pacifist & that followers of Jesus cannot engage in violence of any kind. Down through the centuries they have made a brave & important witness. Others, defined as Christian realists, the late Reinhold Niebuhr for instance, believe that it is sometimes necessary to take up arms, to defend one's self, one's family & nation & values & that there is no conflict between Christianity & a strong military capacity. But Niebuhr & others add that the cross should not be on the shield & Christians who find themselves in military conflict should have a weapon ready but also a heart aching at the tragic inability of human beings to live God's will for peace.

So what's the point of the text? The phrase "From strength to strength" comes from Psalm 84, a beautiful hymn that goes like this. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! Happy are those whose strength is in you. As they go through the valley they make it a place of springs." Strength here is revealed not in defeating the enemy, but in cultivating & nurturing life, transforming an arid, dry valley into a lush garden. Strength

here is for the purpose of life & goodness & truth, mercy & peace, Paul's alternate arsenal. The point is that there are strategies that do work & that the job of faithful people & faithful churches, while not always popular, is to give voice to that alternate arsenal.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her recent book, *Leaving Church*, tells about her decision to give up her ministry as an Episcopal parish priest in order to teach, lecture & write—which she does with great faithfulness and eloquence. As a priest, she wore daily, in addition to her clerical collar, a pectoral cross; those big crosses that clergy wear that hang down beneath the heart. She says, “I liked to wear it back when a cross meant only love to me. Now I know too many people who regard it as a weapon. Some have been cut deeply by it. . . . While those who wield it like a rapier seem to believe that their swordplay pleases God (p. 214).

Taylor asks “If Jesus meant for his followers to rule the world, then why did he teach them to wash feet?” The heart of Christianity is the radical, counterintuitive suggestion that the most powerful force in the world is vulnerable, sacrificial love, love that looks weak & helpless but which, finally, as St. Paul promised, “still stands when all else has fallen”; God's love, expressed most eloquently in that symbol of vulnerability and

weakness—the cross of Jesus Christ. From that love, Paul wrote, nothing in all of creation can separate us, not even death.

When the government of South Africa cancelled a political rally against apartheid, Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu moved the rally into St. George's Cathedral & turned it into a worship service. Soldiers & riot police followed & lined the walls of the cathedral “toujours prêt” at the ready; with weapons & bayonets drawn. Tutu spoke about the evils of apartheid & how rulers who supported it were doomed to fail. Tutu is a small man physically but not spiritually. He pointed a frail finger at the soldiers & police —“You may be powerful, but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost.”

It was a moment of unbelievable tension. Tutu came out from behind his pulpit & flashed his radiant smile. “Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side.”

The crowd roared. The police & soldiers put their weapons away and left the cathedral.

Not many of us will ever find ourselves in that situation. But we do, every one of us, have our battles to fight. Barbara Brown Taylor says her

battle is with her pride, her unwillingness to fail, which means her unwillingness to trust the central truth of the Christian gospel: “life springs from death”.

Most of us know what our battles are about, the small wars we wage: the daily struggle with the hurried, frantic busyness of our lives; our captivity to our possessions; slavery to success & winning at all costs. Some battle crushing poverty & some contend with crushing affluence. Some battle addiction, real addiction. Some battle demons of self-doubt & guilt; some battle memories of broken relationships; some battle depression. Some are in a life-and-death struggle with disease, mustering the courage to get out of bed & go to the radiation lab at 7:00 a.m. & do battle another day.

We can't, most of us can't, choose our particular circumstances in life. But we can choose how to live, what resources to employ, which arsenal to engage. And so I love it when Paul writes, “Put on the whole armor of God.” Reassuring the people of Ephesus & now us that God gives us what we need to stand against spiritual evil. I need to know how to fight despair when I have personal challenges to deal with. As a

community of faith, we need to know how to keep on when the battle is long & the victory is not in sight. It comes down to relying on God's strength. Paul writes, "Be strong in the Lord & in the strength of God's power. "

When you get out of bed in the morning consider fastening the belt of truth around your waist. The Roman soldiers wore a belt into which they tucked their togas so they would not trip when they walked. God's truth will keep us from stumbling into error.

Put on the breastplate of righteousness. In other words, try to do good; follow the commandments; live according to the admonitions of the Sermon on the Mount. Is it easy? Nope, but possible through the grace of Christ.

As shoes for our feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. This is a hard one; this command to walk around everywhere in the gospel of peace. It's hard to let go of bitterness & resentment. It's very tempting to go over & over again, who did what to whom. But Paul says let all that go; change your shoes. Drain your heart of bitterness & fill it with the spirit of reconciliation that comes from him

who is the Prince of Peace.

And finally, the shield of faith, with which we will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Do you know what made Roman soldiers so invincible? The soldier didn't just hold his shield over his own body. Two-thirds covered him but one third was over the person next to him. We need one another at church; we help one another by being here, gathered in faith.

This whole business of discipleship & how daunting it is & how hard it is to follow – can a make a practical suggestion? Stop worrying so much about what you believe about Jesus Christ & whether every word of the bible is an inerrant word. Forget all of that for awhile. Be disciples from the outside in. Put on the habits of faith; come to church, sing the songs, help your neighbor. You'll be surprised at what happens. Some might say that going through the motions is hypocrisy; I call it hope.

So fasten that belt of truth around your waist. Put on your peace shoes. Take up the shield of faith. Get into your discipleship from the outside. Then wait & see what God will do with the inside of you. In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer. Amen.

