

Glen Ridge Congregational Church,  
August 23 2009, Proper 16, Pentecost 12  
Ephesians 6:10-20  
Rev. Cynthia Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

We wrap up our lectionary readings from Ephesians this week –a primer for all of us as to what it means to be Christians and live in a Christian Community - we all are in a common walk of discipleship – today here in Glen Ridge just like those people of Ephesus. We have learned that we must be grounded – we learned of Paul’s rules for living the life of discipleship way – be kind, be truthful, be forgiving and that difficult one: be angry but do not sin. And last week he told us to be careful how we live: three things we must do: be wise, be sober, be thankful. Perhaps the very basics of Christian living: be filled with the spirit – always and for everything give thanks to God in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, it seems that Paul is encouraging those early Christians, recognizing that what he’s been teaching is so very difficult to live out in their daily world. He’s quite a wonderful evangelist, isn’t he.

But the images that have come into my mind as I read this passage are difficult – the wearing of armor takes me to images of war and violent, militaristic terms. The talk of shields and swords and breastplates and helmets is not appealing to those of us who prefer the image of beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. I’ve had a lot of trouble with this passage this week – I’ve had a hard time getting past the images of warfare and violence.

But all we have to do is turn on the news to see those very same images of war and violence – they are as real today as they were in Paul’s time, aren’t they. Perhaps a different genre of violence but it’s still violence. We do constantly find new ways to hurt each other don’t we. Every day there are pictures of the aftermath of suicide bombers – I don’t know about you, but I have almost become numb to them – they’re too prevalent. And gunfire on the streets of our cities – so much this summer in Newark. Children dying at the hands of neglect, beatings, horrible abuse.

Maybe that’s why I have such trouble with this image of armor.

Even learning some of the background of Paul’s letter didn’t really help: Roman occupation in Paul’s time brought soldiers garbed in their armor throughout the area. I know there was a time when that was unfamiliar to us – we weren’t used to military presence around us. But the world has changed – I remember the first time I saw the military presence in Penn Station – it was very startling and frightening. We see soldiers in full uniform on our streets, not just on TV in the Middle East or other hotspots around the world. We’re a hotspot too – we can no longer sit back and detach ourselves from a violent world because that violence has come so close to us.

Maybe my discomfort with this passage relates to that – violence, evil, has come too close to home. That violence is no longer out there somewhere – it’s right here – I can’t pretend it doesn’t exist here anymore.

Through this struggle with the passage, it occurred to me, though, that one of the things a good and effective evangelist needs to do is meet the people where they are. And in this passage that's exactly what Paul is doing - he's using familiar images for his audience. He's engaging them in ways they understand.

How do we engage with this passage - what does it mean to us to put on the whole armor of God? How can this passage meet us where we are? Even if it's uncomfortable, maybe we have to acknowledge that we are in battle too - at war with evil, if you will, at war with the powers both from within and around us. And it is this timeless, so very human war that Paul refers to.

In his book The Magnificent Defeat Frederick Buechner brings this passage to our present day concerns: he says, "Over the centuries we speak of life as a battle. To grow, to move ahead, is to wage war against a variety of adversaries. Most of the time it is an undeclared war. We don't say publicly what it is we are fighting for or against, or why we think it's worth the fight, but nevertheless, we continue to fight the battle."

He goes on to talk about two major battles we all fight - the first is the war of conquest. What we fight to conquer is the world. A place in the world, in the sun, a place that is ours. We fight to be visible, to move into a place out of the shadows - a place in family, community, in our jobs - a place where we can belong. To conquer a territory that can be ours.

Who are the adversaries here? Those of flesh and blood - human beings like ourselves who are fighting the same war, all under a banner that begins with the word myself. Maybe it's myself and my family, myself and my country - but always of flesh against flesh - to gain or regain power - to survive.

What's the armor we wear in this war? Not the armor of God, but the armor of humanity.

And there's another war we all face - Buechner calls this the war of liberation - to liberate that part of ourselves that has somehow become lost. The part of our selves that involves, among other things, the capacity for forgiveness - forgiveness of self and others,

And I began to have some inspiration about an image of the armor of God that met me where I am, that engaged me and let me hear the passage in a new way.

Again - I was carried back to my time with the Integrity women - you know they have come to Integrity from prison, from the streets, perhaps they have self admitted - but what they all have in common is addiction to drugs and a life that has been shattered by this addiction. Some of them have lost their children, contact with their families - they have lost everything you and I take so much for granted. Their fight is an amazing inspiration.

These women are in a battle, a war, for their lives - they have declared war on the powers, the demons that have overcome them. These women are in a war to become human - fully human - to become whole and at peace within their own skins. And isn't this the war we all face every day as well - our battle may be different but we're all in this war together.

It seems to me that addiction is the ultimate "me first" - everything else in life is secondary to meeting the addiction - and the cost is terribly high for sure - addiction is one armor of humanity. But it doesn't work. Oh, it might for a time but it can't last. There comes a time when the drug of choice no longer insulates against the pain of the

world – the pain of loss of self, the pain of separation from God. And there are so many drugs of choice – power, possessions, money, appearances – our jobs – as well as heroin, cocaine, crack, alcohol, food, cigarettes – they all destroy. They all keep us chained. I think we all have more in common with these women than we'd like to acknowledge.

But on to the war of liberation: the inspiration from these women has helped me to understand that we're all in the fight of our lives – coming out of our own darkness into the light of wholeness. The armor of God is what we need, not to restrain, but to liberate. To liberate ourselves and each other to become what God calls us to be – to become what God has created us to become – to be the very best we can be. And to encourage others to do that as well. That's the definition of evangelism, isn't it? Paul teaches us – throughout his writings – there is only one truth: Jesus Christ – who has shown us what it means to be truly human. Jesus Christ who teaches us about who God really is. Jesus Christ who has taught us to live. Jesus Christ who has taught us how to love.

Buechner says, "Above all, we must take the shield of faith, and faith here is not so much believing this thing or that thing about God as it is hearing a voice that says, come unto me. We hear the voice, and then we start to go without really knowing what to believe either about the voice or about ourselves – and yet we go. Faith is standing in the darkness, and a hand is there, and we take it."

The shield of faith: that's an image of the armor of God that's helpful for me and it became dramatically clear this week. It was Thursday morning when I logged on to facebook and found a message from a young man who I knew in Middlebury – he was in confirmation class, the youth group – we've kept in touch on occasion as he went through college, began his career, was married. I had become very close with him and his family, especially his Dad. One of my first hospital visits in Middlebury was with his father after the first of a couple of back surgeries. Andy asked in his message that I call him on his cellphone as soon as possible – I knew it wasn't going to be good news.

Well, on Thursday morning his father, Dan, died surrounded by his family who loved him and who he loved so deeply. My own tears welled up as I thought about Dan and our times together. You see, he had been diagnosed with renal cell carcinoma back in March, 1998. He had surgery, follow up treatments and was determined he'd beat it. And he did – until tumors began to grow in his lungs and in his brain. Dan himself wrote at that time, "while many would think that this is certainly a grim chain of events, I found that this was the beginning of a battle I wasn't willing to give into." He was put on interferon for six months – and he came out of this too. He spent 5 months at Bethesda and was part of a National Institute for Health renal cell transplant trial – he was released from this in May, 2005, well enough to go back to work! To add to his burden, though, he was laid off from his job in 2007 – but through it all, he stayed positive. It was only a couple weeks ago that he became terribly sick again – when I talked to Andy on Thursday, we talked about the battle he'd fought for over 10 years – and I suddenly had a new image in my mind of what the armor of God looks like.

A shield of faith – because through his entire ordeal, Dan never lost his faith. He wrote, God works in mysterious ways. He has a plan which only he knows. I'm a very fortunate man who has my family, my faith, my church family, friends, and even people who do not know me – they have all prayed for me and made me the person I am today."

During these times, our prayers together were profound – he knew his future was in God’s hands and that was ok with him. That’s not to say he didn’t have moments of fear and anxiety – moments of deep sadness – moments of anger - moments of asking why me – but the question became, why not me – surely one of the most profound faith statements I’ve ever heard.

Sick as he was sometimes, he’d look me right in the eye, smile, and say, “It’s ok.” And it really was ok – he knew he was surrounded by God’s love – that shield of faith; surrounded by God’s love – an armor that can’t be violated, no matter what. Again, from Dan’s own writings: there is always hope and hope starts with faith in God.

Now if that’s not a wonderful description of the armor of God, I don’t know what is.

Andy said his last hours in the hospital surrounded by those who loved him – those he loved – were peaceful. Dan was ready to go into the arms of God where pain and suffering are no more, where he would know first hand the eternal love that God has for each of us.

A sad time indeed for those of us who were blessed to be touched by Dan’s life – but a powerful statement of faith and an example to us and a profound image of the armor of God.

Amazing how God meets us where we are, isn’t it.

Buechner’s words: faith is standing in the darkness, and a hand is there and we take it: taking on the armor of God is about our relationship with God – not to close ourselves off or in, but to allow us to be free. Free to be who we are. Free to be human. Free to be rid of that which weighs us down. I’ve come to realize that Dan knew that – what a powerful testimony!

Maybe the lesson is to build our armor, our relationship with God not just when our lives are going well – when we’re reasonably satisfied with our lives, when the glass is half full instead of when it’s half empty. Do we recognize God’s peace when there’s a lull in the battle? Does our faith speak to us when things are quiet, satisfying, happy – are we as quick to offer our prayers of praise and thanksgiving? I remember being with Dan one day when tests showed him in remission – and our prayer was just as profound then as it was days before as he was in the hospital waiting to undergo those tests.

The armor of God was built up in both good and bad times for Dan – the armor of God surrounded him in good times and in bad, and continues to do that for his family and friends. And for each one of us too.

The armor of God that doesn’t restrain but liberates. What a gift, a blessing that is. What a blessing, gift that was, is, for Dan – and what a free gift and a blessing that’s free and available to each one of us as well.

May we hear God’s voice that says, “Come unto me.” And then may we go, even as we stand in the darkness, recognizing the hand which is there, and we take it.” That’s the armor of God that will sustain us now and always. Amen.

Let us pray: God, give us the courage to walk in your ways, sometimes at odds with the ways of the world. Help us to remember who we are and whose we are. Help us to take our place in this world but not be of the world. Encircle us with your loving care and help us to be open to your guidance. To you be all honor and glory. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.