

August 26, 2012  
Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
**Live Prayerfully: Putting on the Armor of God**  
**Ephesians 6:10-20**

How do we live in a violent world?

It is no stretch to say that our culture is rooted in a framework of violence – we have become too aware of that in our own society.

Theological commentators and sociologists agree that it is a condition of human society that we are rooted in cultures of violence.

Responding with violence or the threat of violence comes all too quickly as a solution in dealing with conflict.

**So, how are we to live as disciples of Christ Jesus in a violent world?**

It would seem from Paul's imagery in Ephesians 6 regarding putting on the full armor of God that we respond to a violent world with violence

- often when this passage is preached much is made of the imagery of the armor
- slides show the armor of a Roman soldier, or even someone dresses up in full Roman military garb, or if contemporized, with full US Military garb.

**But that is not point of the armor imagery.**

Paul is writing to a Gentile church – in Ephesus, a people well associated with the military occupation of Pax Romana

- and so if Paul is talking about struggling against powers and authorities
- the minds of the Ephesians would quickly embrace the need for equipment and weaponry to fight
- so armor makes sense.

But, in using the metaphor of armor, Paul is not talking about weapons as they understood weapons.

In turning swords into plowshares, Paul gets their attention with the militaristic imagery, **but then endows it with images of nonviolence**

- images which use plowshares and pruning hooks
- to cultivate the presence of God's reign.

It would be a gross misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Paul to assert that he supports violence in his use of the armor imagery

- because it would be a complete misunderstanding of the ways of God, of Jesus, of God's reign, of the Gospel, and our participation with God in God's mission.

**God's ways have nothing to do with violence!**

Yet, Paul **does address the fact** that we live in a violent world, an evil world, a world that threatens the well being of humanity.

In this world, the people of God are to take a stand and this stand is to be taken against the devil and the powers of evil

– the schemes and conniving of rulers, authorities, and powers which subjugate people, enslave people, and use people for their own ends.

Christ defeated these spiritual forces of evil, through his life, ministry, death and resurrection, yet we still live encountering them and need to deal with them.

Being a follower and disciple of Jesus is to place ourselves in the forefront of this encounter

– and rather than shying away from it, Paul urges us to face it  
– he states **we are involved in a struggle.**

But the one thing we need to get straight is that we do not struggle *against* flesh and blood, **even it be** the flesh and blood of rulers, authorities, and powers.

Rather than struggling *against* flesh and blood, Tom Yoder Neufeld expresses, **instead, we struggle *for* flesh and blood.** (cf. Yoder Neufeld, Ephesians, p. 313)

**We struggle *for* flesh and blood** that all flesh and blood might be set free from the powers and authorities which steal life – even flesh/blood of powers.

That is what our participation with God in God's mission is all about

– we are a new humanity, a new community in Christ so that we might live demonstrating a new reality, rooted in God's reign **for all flesh and blood.**

### **Let's make this personal**

– it is too easy to talk about this in large scale societal ways  
– when most of us experience this struggle with life stealing realities in up close and personal ways.

Though life stealing realities are not God's intent for us

– the reality seems to be that we live with the effects of brokenness not just in society, but in our personal lives as well

– we face disease and darkness in our own lives  
– we struggle with alienation and unforgiveness  
– we struggle with doubts about our selfworth  
– we struggle with marital or family conflict

– we try to make sense of our lives when all seems to be going wrong, when we thought life with God would make things go all right.

It seems that if we are struggling for flesh and blood, **much of that struggle is *for* our own flesh and blood.**

There is no passivity here in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, **we are involved in a struggle**

– involving the lives of others, and especially our own lives  
– as a community we need to be much more aware of how we are to struggle for the flesh and blood of one another.

The metaphor of the armor of God is to set up a contrast between weapons and non-weapons or instruments of peacemaking.

Weapons, by definition are meant to hurt and destroy.

The focus of Paul in using the imagery of armor is not to point out the armor, but to point out the kind of instruments of peace we are to use as followers of Jesus.

**It is with these non-weapons with which we are called to confront rulers, authorities, and powers.**

These non-weapons are radically different from weapons of destruction.

They are not “weapons” of violence.

These non-weapons, these tools, **bring life in the face of death**, whereas, weapons bring death in the midst of life.

These non-weapons bring peace, rather than sorrow, grief and death.

These non-weapons wage peace and hope, rather than waging war and despair.

We as the people of God are in a struggle, making the use of non-weapons, the tools of peace, because we are on the move, we are on the move with God, engaging the forces of brokenness and evil with the ways of God.

We as the people of God, the church, are not to shy away from encountering that which is broken and evil in the world

– rather we are to move headlong into it – as a community as a whole in the face of injustice in society, and as a community supporting one another in the facing of brokenness and darkness in each of our own lives.

As we move, as we participate with God in God’s mission, we bring life in place of death, not in a manner of conquering or dominating

– but rather in a manner which embraces, comforts, strengthens, and walks alongside with others in offering the peace that is in Jesus.

Matthew 16 portrays an image of the church on the move. Jesus says to Peter, “I will build my church and the gates of death will not overcome it.” Note that it is death that is hidden behind a fortress, with gates, not the church – the church has no gates, because the church is not a fortress.

**The church confronts the gates of death;** we in our discipleship, in our living, our day to day living, confront the gates of death

– and the promise of Jesus is that death will not overcome us, rather, **we by our living overcome death.**

**What then are our life-giving non-weapons expressed through putting on the full armor of God?**

Rather than giving focus to the articles of warfare: helmet, breastplate, armor, shield and sword, **we give focus to the non-weapons, tools, of living prayerfully:**

The armor of God is **God’s armor**,

God’s nonviolent ways of overcoming the rulers, authorities and powers which are under the influence of the forces of evil.

**To put on God’s armor is to not merely engage in certain kinds of activity, it is to put on Christ – that is the foundational message of Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus. Christ, is the armor of God, which we put on.**

As we put on Christ, our non-weapons, our tools are: truth, justice, peace, faithfulness, and the word of God and these non-weapons are to be utilized in a life of prayer.

Putting on Christ is God's means, God's way for overcoming that which wars against flesh and blood.

In putting on Christ and continuing the ministry of Christ, we live prayerfully in the world.

**Truth is given significance and first place – in Christ, we are girded, clothed with truth.**

As Yoder Neufeld expresses, “truth marks both the nature of God's presence in the world in Jesus and the way those who have put on Christ are to behave toward each other [and others]” (Y-N *Ephesians*, 299).

This is more than being honest, it means **being Jesus in the world**

– speaking truth, living truth to all people and to the powers who and which are still under the influence of the ways of evil.

May our mind and our manner of living be shaped by Jesus – to believe Jesus and to believe what Jesus believes.

**Justice/Righteousness has to do with the heart and is about the doing the right thing** – no matter the cost to us.

I remember a situation at Northern in which we were confronted in doing the right thing

– and as we were deciding on a different course of actions, I asked the president, “is this the right thing for us to do?”

I remember his response avoiding my question – “it is the necessary thing.”

We are often tempted to do what is necessary – yet, we are called in struggling *for* flesh and blood to do that which is right, that which is just.

**Peace has to do with our feet.** I am reminded by Isaiah's declaration: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (Isaiah 52:7).

Peace has to do with feet because peace gets in the way of violence, peace gets in the way of conflict

– we cannot do that by sitting still

– we need to put ourselves into the way of that which wars against flesh and blood so that we might speak and act for flesh and blood

– in the midst of violence, we bring Christ, the shalom of God.

**Faith or faithfulness, is placing our trust in God** – and only in Christ can we trust God as Jesus trusted God.

The image of the shield is often seen as a defensive one, but with the church being on the move against the forces of evil

– faith and faithfulness is our trusting in God, God being with us, **as we advance against that which wars against flesh and blood.**

We express faith and faithfulness, not in retreat, but in advancing the ways of God in the midst of the turmoils and messiness of life.

**Faith is for living when everything goes all wrong**, in the midst of our struggles, rather than when life is all okay.

**Salvation or liberation has to do with our minds – in Christ, we have a whole different perspective on life**

– we think, and live in light of salvation, liberation.

Paul in Php 2 says to put on the mind of Christ.

In Romans 12: to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

To embrace salvation is more than a concern for ourselves, our souls, **it is to take on Christ's concern for the world, for all humanity**

– for all to be restored to relationship with God and with humanity

– for there to be no divisions, no barriers, no racism, sexism

– the mind of Christ is to have a perspective on the world that always, always is seeking to bring about the wholeness of life that has been made visible through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ

**The Word of God – the sword of the Spirit – a “sword” that unmasks the principalities and powers, and gives life to all who need to be set free.**

Living in God's Story, living out God's Story and Vision is for the narrative of God to continue being our narrative in all of life

– that is why we need to do more than merely read it

– it is to be our story, our heart beat

– because as God's Word is the heartbeat of our lives, our day to day living will bind that which is evil and set free those who are oppressed.

This is a way of being, a way of living in which the Spirit of God has deep influence in our lives

– and such a deep influence that we find ourselves identifying with Jesus, in his declaration in Luke 4:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me [and “worded” me] to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me [missional language] to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

These are the non-weapons, the tools of peacemaking, of our putting on Christ Jesus: truth, justice, peace, faithfulness, and the word of God.

And these non-weapons find their fullest expression in unmasking the forces of darkness

– in our lives

– in our community

– and in the world,

when we engage them in a life of prayer.

**It is living prayerfully that best situates us to struggle *for* flesh and blood.**

That is the context of God's armor –

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kind of prayers and requests. . . . always keep on praying. . . . Pray also for me . . . Pray that I may declare fearlessly”

**Living prayerfully** is to live struggling *against* the forces of darkness and evil and to live struggling *for* flesh and blood.

Praying places us in connection with God because we are communicating with God and God is communicating with us.

Prayer places us in connection

- with ourselves
- one another
- our community
- our world,

because we bring ourselves and others into conversation with God.

Living prayerfully is to be in solidarity with God, in solidarity with those whom we live among for they are ones whom God notices,

it involves us putting on Christ so that we may love the world just as God loves the world.

Living prayerfully is being mindful that God desires to inundate every part of our lives,

- each of our actions,
- all of our thinking and visioning
- with the presence of God and the peace of God.

Living prayerfully sets us free to be God's people,

- participating with God in bringing about a new thing for all humanity and creation.

So, let us live prayerfully, putting on the full armor of peace, the full armor of God

**Because we are *daily called* and *empowered* by God's Spirit, as Jesus' disciples in the world,**

- to struggle *for* flesh and blood,**
- to struggle *against* the rulers, authorities and powers,**
- to set all humanity free in a world beset by violence.**