

PROPER SIXTEEN, PENTECOST 14, YEAR B, AUGUST 25, 2024

Every week Sue sends me a copy of the bulletin so I can insert a picture that relates to the Gospel or one of the other lessons that I will be preaching on. I planned to preach on the Ephesians passage this morning so I googled the phrase "put on the armor of God" and all the images that came up were all of soldiers from Roman times to medieval times to current times attired in military armor.

The effect of that imagery is about going to battle and being a warrior for your Christian beliefs. Unfortunately, this has led to innumerable, ghastly and costly wars which Christians perpetrated against non Christians and also against those who didn't uphold certain specific Christian beliefs that they believed had to be eradicated. This is an embarrassment of distorted reasoning that Paul would soundly refute. Paul's understanding of putting on the armor of God is the antithesis of literally putting on military armor to do battle.

We forget that early Christianity was largely pacifist. Some early leaders of the church even refused to baptize members of the military unless they renounced their profession. You see, Paul was not advising a militarization of the faith rather he was actually offering a counter-image of a warrior to us. Now he was very aware of the Roman soldiers armor since he was in prison. He was also familiar with the type of speech that a Roman general would deliver to stir up the troops. As one commentator put it, Paul adopts a subversive manner in both using the armor metaphor and the speech format to encourage courageous but non-aggressive faith.

This warrior he describes carries no harmful weapons and has no deadly equipment. This suit of armor is one that is equipped for proclaiming the gospel of peace. This is a different kind of soldier - not one who seeks to conquer or who seeks victory, but one who seeks to spread God's word, the word of peace, love and grace.

What Paul does here completely subverts our normal concept of armor, soldier, warrior, and creates for us a whole new understanding of what it means to be dedicated to serving Christ, providing a sort-of instruction manual for us.

If we look closely at the words we'll find the answer. We read, "Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and 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, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

The weapons and armor Paul talks about - truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, listening to the voice of God - were the opposite of the weapons used by the Roman army. What Paul is telling the church in Ephesus is that he recognizes there is a battle going on and it's a battle of God's goodness and the powers that want to destroy it. Human distortions of power thrive in secrecy, in dissembling, in violence, and in the capacity to drive a wedge between groups by promoting fear and suspicion. But the strength of the Lord, the non-armor armor, is transparency, mercy, peace and an absolute trust in the dynamic interplay of Spirit and Word. This is the appropriate armor for spreading the gospel of peace but remember the reality is that spreading peace is hard work.

During the apartheid in South Africa the government tried to shut down opposition by canceling a political rally, so Archbishop Desmond Tutu declared that he would hold a church service instead. On this occasion, St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town was filled with worshippers while outside the cathedral hundreds of police gathered, which was a show of force intended to intimidate. As Tutu was preaching, they entered the Cathedral, armed, and lined the walls. They took out notebooks and recorded Tutu's words. But Tutu was not intimidated. He preached against the evils of apartheid, declaring it could not endure. And at one extraordinary point he addressed the police directly. He said, "You are powerful. You are very powerful, but you are not gods and I serve a God who cannot be mocked. So, since you've already lost, since you've already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!" And with that the congregation erupted in dance and song amid the struggle

They put on the armor of God. The message Paul is trying to get across is that it's not about winning the war, but about winning the peace, a peace that starts in a human heart which aligned with God's heart radiates outwards to others.

So the function of the "armor of God" is to keep the faithful alive — alive in Christ. God's armor does not so much keep us from dying as God's armor keeps us alive — alive in Christ, alive to love, alive to hope, alive to peace.

The armor of God is not visible and it doesn't come with all the ornate metal work, the fancy scrolling, gold inlay, or weighty wealth that medieval armor offered. But there is a life-sustaining, life-giving protection that God's armor provides. God's armor layers us with the love of Christ and the love of God that pushes us to exhibit that love.

Pierre de Chardin, a French philosopher and Jesuit priest, was trained as a paleontologist and geologist. De Chardin wrote about the history of scientific discovery and believed that the discovery of fire was the most important scientific discovery in all of human history. The human capacity to harness fire is so important, he said, that without it human civilization would be impossible. Fire gave us the ability to cook and prevent disease it helped us warm our environment so we could migrate. The Bronze age, Iron age, Technological age, the Industrial revolution all are impossible without fire. For us today, if it wasn't for the control burn of a missile that put a satellite into space we wouldn't have our smart phones. DeChardin then turned the tables and said if human beings ever harnessed the power of love it would be the second time in history that human beings had discovered fire. That fire is the love of God. That's the power that can change the world.

You see weapons and armour are meant to make you look strong and invincible. The Christians in Ephesus who first read Paul's words knew that. They would have seen Roman soldiers around all the time. Paul knew it too. But Paul knew it's not weapons of iron that win it's about winning the peace. As I said before, a peace that starts in the human heart which aligned with God's heart radiates outwards to others.

It's a tough message - if it doesn't feel tough then we are probably not being honest with ourselves. It goes against the grain, against our human nature - that's why we so seldom manage to achieve it. But as de Chardin said if we could just learn to harness that power of God's love the world could indeed change.

May we find the courage to hear those life-giving words of love, and walk the path they call us onto, in the ways that lead us to harness that love and peace. Amen