

## PROPER SIXTEEN, PENTECOST 13, AUGUST 22, 2021

Did you know that there are over 14,000 pieces of ancient armor and weapons in the Metropolitan Museum of Art dating from 400 BCE? In medieval times armor grew to be a source of artistic expression with intricate designs. In fact, kings and noblemen commissioned fantastic suits of armor that were designed more for parade days than for the battlefields.

In contrast the Roman armor described in this week's epistle text from Ephesians was far different. It was lightweight, utilitarian, and improved upon on thousands of battlefields. The "breastplate" was a kind of lightweight chain mail. The "shield" was either rectangular or an elongated oval. The military belt, which was worn at all times had a place for a dagger. The helmet offered cheek, ear, and neck protection. Marching sandals, were equipped with gripping studs on the sole. A simple coarse woolen tunic was worn under all the various protective gear. The function of the Roman soldier's armor was defensive. It was designed to keep the soldier from dying so that he could go on fighting for the Empire.

The function of the Christian's "armor" described in today's Ephesians lesson is quite different. Paul uses the parts of the Roman soldiers outfit and puts a unique spin on it. He describes these pieces as parts of God's own armor that we should put on so that we can be protected and able to keep on fighting or spreading God's truth.

The belt of truth is the truth that Jesus has shown us through his example of how we are to relate to God and one another. Elsewhere Paul describes how we are to have the same mind of Christ so that we can be humble and recognize the humility and love that undergirds us. This undergirding humility and love is the belt of truth.

The shield of faithfulness is God's faithfulness to us. Just as in Romans where Paul tells us nothing will ever separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus so is that faithfulness of God, who will never leave us, our shield.

The helmet of salvation is a metaphor for God's own liberating power. It is God's driving desire and purpose, out of unfathomable love for creation, to set all of us on the path of liberating love.

And the sword of the Spirit is the ability of God to communicate through us in word and deed by the Holy Spirit in ways that are so loving, moral and spiritual, that they accomplish extraordinary conversions of heart, and life-changing alterations of mind and soul.

By putting on this armor Paul says this is the breastplate of the Christian warrior whose only mission is God's justice and righteousness. What is God's righteousness? God's righteousness is love connecting to all that is not love.

We need to clothe ourselves in the power of God's own love. That is the power that is important. We are to carry on where Jesus left off, conducting ourselves collectively in ways that are not our ways but God's ways, wearing the shoes of love and peace so we can walk in his path and draw everything into relationship with God.

Now the "powers" Paul references are those things that stand in direct opposition to this mission of love. And we - all Christians - are to name evil on all levels: great and small, personal and impersonal, individual and systemic, identifying all that resists the saving activity of God among humanity in ourselves as well as in the world around us. How do we identify those powers that are in opposition to God's saving love?

In a sermon in 1961, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., said that we will know when it's God's love that is at work against the Powers – whatever they are - by the outcomes. To paraphrase: If the Powers serve to destroy then Love serves to build up. The Powers seek destructive ends. Love seeks constructive ends. The Powers seek to annihilate. Love seeks to convert. The Powers seek to live in monologue. Love seeks to live in dialogue.

And so, when Paul says, "Put on the whole armor of God," he's saying in different words what Jesus said when he said, "love the enemy," or those who differ from us because "there is something about love that can transform, that can change, that can arouse the conscience of those forces who wish to destroy all that is good." It takes time and a lot of effort but if we don't try nothing changes.

Let me tell you a story that illustrates this point. I don't know if you know who Jonathan Myrick Daniels was. Friday was the 56<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his martyrdom. Jonathan Daniels had been a graduate of VMI and at the age of 26 was a seminarian at the Episcopal Seminary in Cambridge Mass. In March 1965, Daniels answered the call of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who recruited students and clergy to join the movement in Selma, Alabama, to take part in the march for voting rights. Daniels and several other seminary students participated in the march and upon his return to seminary he requested permission to spend the rest of the semester working in Selma.

During the next few months, Jonathan worked to integrate the local Episcopal church by taking groups of young African Americans to the church to no avail. In May, Daniels returned to the seminary to take his semester exams and after he passed them he returned to Alabama in July to continue his work. On August 14, 1965, Daniels was one of a group of 29 protesters who went to Fort Deposit, Alabama to picket its whites-only stores. All of the protesters were arrested and taken to jail in the nearby town of Hayneville. Finally, on August 20, the prisoners were released and the group waited near the courthouse jail while one of their members called for transport. Daniels with three others—a white Catholic priest and two black female activists—walked to buy a cold soft drink at nearby Varner's Cash Store, one of the few local places to serve non-whites. But barring the front was Tom L. Coleman, an unpaid special deputy who was holding a shotgun and had a pistol in a holster. Coleman threatened the group and leveled his gun at seventeen-year-old Ruby Sales. Daniels pushed Sales down and caught the full blast of the shotgun. He was instantly killed. Upon learning of Daniels' murder, Martin Luther King, Jr. stated that "one of the most heroic Christian deeds of which I have heard in my entire ministry was performed by Jonathan Daniels".

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. That's what Jonathan Daniels did when he sacrificed his life to save Ruby Sales.

To put God's call for us to love in a different perspective, we need to look at what Pierre de Chardin wrote. De Chardin was a French philosopher and Jesuit priest, who was trained as a paleontologist and geologist and wrote about the history of scientific discovery. He 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. Jonathan Daniels discovered that fire. That fire of the love of God. That's the power that can change the world.

You see weapons and amour are meant to make you look strong and invincible. The Christians in Ephesus 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 with love. It's a love that starts in the human heart and when 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