

Ephesians 6:10-20

¹⁰ Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and his powerful strength. ¹¹ Put on God's armor so that you can make a stand against the tricks of the devil. ¹² We aren't fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens. ¹³ Therefore, pick up the full armor of God so that you can stand your ground on the evil day and after you have done everything possible to still stand. ¹⁴ So stand with the belt of truth around your waist, justice as your breastplate, ¹⁵ and put shoes on your feet so that you are ready to spread the good news of peace. ¹⁶ Above all, carry the shield of faith so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word.

¹⁸ Offer prayers and petitions in the Spirit all the time. Stay alert by hanging in there and praying for all believers. ¹⁹ As for me, pray that when I open my mouth, I'll get a message that confidently makes this secret plan^[a] of the gospel known. ²⁰ I'm an ambassador in chains for the sake of the gospel. Pray so that the Lord will give me the confidence to say what I have to say.

BOLDLY GO!

According to the grace given to you, will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world?

This is the last in the series about “Loving boldly”. The theme is tied to our Baptism vows that we made, or that were made on our behalf and we renewed. Remaining faithful members of Christ’s church and serving as Christ’s representatives in the world. This is perhaps that most challenging aspect of being a faithful follower. When we are in worship, in a small group, on the leadership board, singing in the choir, we are supported and encouraged by all the things that we do that are church related. What is much more difficult is to carry that witness into the community, the world in which we live even sometimes it is difficult even with our families.

Every fall for a number of years I travel to Myrtle Beach with a bunch of men (20 of us) to play marathon golf. Six days in a row of golf. Originally that group began with mostly members from Davidsonville UMC. As people have moved on and some have died that group has changed. Add to that the adverse political climate and you might imagine some of the conflicting conversations that have occurred especially in recent years. A couple of years ago I tried having a conversation with a former church member about LGBTQ+ issues as they related to the church. It didn’t go well. Evidently my view of openness and inclusion was very different from this person’s Biblical Literal view. It almost ended our relationship. Since that time there is an unspoken rule among that 20 that when the whole group is together, we don’t talk politics or theology. This is pretty sad. It reminds me of how difficult it is to serve as Christ’s representatives in the world. We live in a time of such divisiveness that it is difficult to even have a conversation. Some of you know this from your own experience, i.e. the things you are no longer discussed over Thanksgiving and Holiday meals.

It begs the question, what are we to do? The author of Ephesians suggests an interesting methodology. “Put on God’s armor.” We have to be quickly reminded that the author is speaking metaphorically. The armor is not to prepare us to go into physical battle but rather to equip us to move into the world as Christ’s representatives.

There are some important things to remember about the Armor of God. First of all, it is for our defensive. When I was 7 and began playing little league baseball my first position that I played was catcher. Now this was a gazillion years ago and we didn’t have a lot of fancy equipment. There was one set of catcher’s equipment for each team. I was pretty small at the time and since the equipment was “average size” you can imagine how big it was on me. The chest protector almost touches the ground when I put it on. The knee and leg

protector not only covered my knees but came halfway up my thighs. The mask was the only thing that sort of fit and the oversized glove was my best defensive weapon. It was an outfit that made it difficult for me to move or chase the foul balls but it did protect me from lots of nicked balls and stray pitches. God's armor is first of all protection for us as we attempt to stand for truth and justice and peace.

Secondly (you guessed it there might be three points in the sermon); God's Armor is not of our own creation. It doesn't come about because of our own determination, or persistence or learning. Those are all good attributes but God's Armor is a result of our relationship with God, that gives us amazing strength and courage and patience. It allows us to stand firm, sometimes taking the abuse of others in our efforts to speak the truth in love, to stand against the evil that surrounds us and to offer solutions of peace rather than conflict. Martin Luther King, Jr's Non-violent approach to conflict, is perhaps an outstanding example of what can be achieved by standing firm in our faith, but also a reminder of how difficult it can be. There were many who literally gave their lives in non-violent protest. Even in our own time these sacrifices continue.

In my own experiences of protest, I never felt my life was at stake. I think this is true for most of us. In reality our witness of faith outside of church happens in small and subtle ways. In all my years of pastoring I have often been surprised to discover the private witnesses of many of my members. Their participation in community groups and organizations designed to bring justice, hope, or peace to folks around them. Some driving for home delivery of meals for the elderly. Another supporting a local women's shelter to help these people in desperate situations. Coaching baseball and soccer and women's softball. The list is almost as long as the number of folks I could mention. The practical tools of truth and justice and peace and righteousness often have their beginnings in our relatedness to the church and fellow members. These gifts of God's Armor enable us to step beyond the doors of church into the world and make a difference where we encounter others and witness our faith in small and unassuming ways.

Finally, back to baptism, because this is where it all begins. Whether we were baptized as infants or adults the commitments and promises that we made or that were made on our behalf become the jumping off place for taking on the Armor of God and making a difference in our communities and world. Many of us have no memory of our baptism because we were infants. Perhaps you remember the time as a youth or adult that you reaffirmed that commitment. And every time we have a baptism or receive new members in the church we are reminded of that commitment and recommit ourselves.

As United Methodists we affirm a variety of methods of baptism. Sprinkling and pouring are most common, especially with children. Occasionally there is a baptism with immersion

(no it isn't just for the Baptists, although our theology about that is a bit different). In my 44 years of active ministry, I only had one occasion to do a baptism by immersion. I was one of the Pastors at Foundry UMC in downtown DC. A young adult woman wanted to be baptized. She had had this significant turning around event in her life and felt that immersion better represented this experience. It was wintertime, so going to the river was not practical but we had a good relationship with First Baptist Church which was down the street from us. They were happy to make arrangements and facilitate all the necessary things. They have an elevated baptismal pool in the sanctuary. They provided an appropriate white robe for this young woman to be baptized in. I was a bit nervous because I had never done an immersion baptism before and so the pastor gave me clear and helpful instructions. I didn't want to drown the poor woman. They also provided me with hip waders (like you use for fishing) so I could stay dry. I managed through it, lowered the young woman in the pool without her getting tons of water in her nose. It was an amazing experience for me as well (although I admit it felt like the waders were leaking and I was sure I was going to be soaked.)

Baptism can be for each of us a transforming event, that symbolizes the way in which God is working in us. And every time we witness it again it is an opportunity for us to reaffirm that commitment. We can serve as God's representative in the world, in our communities and even our families. It is unlikely some grand thing that we have done but rather a small gesture, our support of others, our offering truth and justice and peace and a faithful witness in all the places it is needed. We step out not in our own power, but as a collective body committed to showing the world what the love of Christ actually looks like in action.

Boldly go, perhaps as no one has gone before!