When Metaphors Become Dangerous

Ephesians 6:10-17   Isaiah 59:15b-19   *Rev. Todd B. Freeman*
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Let's start with a good old fashion English lesson. What is a metaphor, and how and why is it used? A metaphor is a comparison made between two or more things using figurative or descriptive language, not literal language. As a literary device, they often serve to make difficult to understand ideas or concepts easier to comprehend. At other times they're used simply to make a text more vivid and interesting.

The Bible, as you can imagine, is filled with metaphors that authors used to help them describe their understanding of God, the people of Israel, Jesus, his followers, and so many others. Here are some examples.

- My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (Psalm 18:2)

- Yet, O Lord, you are our Father [let's not forget that's a metaphor], we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. (Isaiah 64:8)

- As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you. (Isaiah 66:13)

- May my teaching drop like the rain, my speech condense like the dew. (Deuteronomy 32:1b-2)

- God shielded Jacob, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye. (Deuteronomy 32:10b)

- The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. (Psalm 23:1)

- You are the salt of the earth. (Matthew 5:13)

- The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. (John 3:8)

- Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Feed my sheep.' (John 21:16)

- Jesus said, 'I am the bread of life; those who come to me will not hunger, and those who believe in me will never thirst. (John 6:35)

Concerning Jesus' identity, there's also:

- I am the light of the word
- I am the door
- I am the good shepherd
- I am the true vine.

None of these examples, of course, are to be taken in literal way. For there is a danger when the figurative language of a metaphor becomes literalized. How many people do you suppose, for example, still imagine God as an old gray bearded man sitting on a throne up in the sky somewhere? It's just a metaphor! The damage done over the millennia by envisioning God strictly as male is immeasurable.

There's another metaphor that has had an enormously strong influence on Christianity – an often-negative influence, in my opinion. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the church he founded in Ephesus (located in modern-day Turkey), sought to encourage that Christian congregation so that they could remain strong in their new faith. Most of you are probably familiar with the metaphor of **putting on the 'whole armor of God'**. There have been countless children sermons, perhaps even here years ago, where the leader has dressed up one of the kids with a belt, a breastplate, shoes, a shield, a helmet, and a sword. While standing there like a cute tiny Roman soldier, the other children who gaze upon this sight are **told that they are soldiers in the battle of their lives, a spiritual war against the devil**.

I am horrified by what many have done with this passage of scripture in formulating their approach to the Christian faith. I know from which I speak, because I use to be one of them. I was once convinced, like so many Christians still are today, that I was a spiritual warrior for Jesus, locked in a battle not only with the forces of darkness and evil, which are real, but also with Satan himself, and his demons. And you know what? **When you think there's an actual demon lurking around every corner, it's not hard to convince yourself that you've found one – even within oneself**.

As progressives, however, we know that there is a big down side to living a militaristic approach to a life of faith. **It's not a big leap to becoming *militant* toward those with whom you end up labeling as the enemy, or simply as the "other." And in my experience, sooner or later that militant approach inevitably turns inward, unleashing and inflicting some serious psychological and spiritual violence on oneself.** I would venture to guess that there are others here in this sanctuary today who have experienced something along these lines in your own journey of faith, as well.

Submersing oneself in the language of warfare, battle, and spiritual arsenals can even cloud a person from being able to understand the true nature and character of God (which as Christians we primarily understand in and through the life and ministry of Jesus), as all about love, not war. And yes, I know God is portrayed in the Old Testament as causing or allowing one army or nation to conquer another. But that's a long explanation for another sermon.

It's said that people in Jesus' day were expecting a militaristic Messiah, one who would lead the Jewish people to oust their Roman oppressors. While many people in our day and age expect the same type of Savior, that's not the kind of Messiah we ended up getting in Jesus. Yet, using the metaphor of the Church as an "army of God" is still common in many religious circles, especially here in the Bible Belt. But this metaphor, when used as a model for ministry, has been misused and abused throughout the centuries. Very real horrors have been, and continue to be, carried out in the name of God.

In reaction to this particular militaristic approach to Christianity, others are trying to tone down this imagery. That includes our own denomination, the PC(USA). When the blue-covered Presbyterian Hymnal was published in 1990, and again when the newest hymnal was published in 2014, blatantly militaristic hymns were removed. The most popular one being "Onward Christian Soldiers." But here's the twist. **Like all metaphors, militaristic language for God and the people of God isn't necessarily bad or**

wrong in and of itself. Rather, it's what people have done when literalizing that metaphor.

Not surprisingly, Jesus didn't use *any* military references when he talked about the "kingdom of God." But others certainly did. As we heard in the Old Testament reading from Isaiah, God is referred to as a kind of Divine Warrior, putting on the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation to bring about justice. This particular metaphor for God was extended to the people of God by the apostle Paul. And the Old Testament Israelites no doubt saw themselves literally as God's army, often fighting and killing those they considered not to be the "people of God." **They justified violence against their enemies because they convinced themselves that their opponents were also the enemies of God. How convenient.** To this very day, many countries continue to be convinced of this in order to justify war, including our own.

In Jesus' day, however, that militaristic imagery became less literal and more metaphorical, where the people of God were engaged more in a spiritual battle than a physical war. That was certainly the approach taken by the Apostle Paul. So before we completely reject this militaristic metaphor for the Church we need to put it back into context in order to glean what may have been **Paul's original point**.

First and foremost, even though Paul compares followers of Jesus to what would have been the common image of a Roman soldier, Christians *aren't* told to attack and fight other people, but rather are commanded simply to stand fast. Paul's stance was one of defense, not offense. **Putting on the 'whole armor of God' was meant to emphasize preparedness, alertness, discipline and unity – the marks of any good military. But this was not to extend into the realm of violence.** Yes, the image of a Christian 'soldier' is common in the New Testament, but it is never used as one of violence against other people, as has become more commonplace today.

Paul clearly states, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh," but against spiritual powers of darkness and evil (Eph. 6:12). For do we not, as progressives, understand ourselves to be in a battle, of sorts, against the powers of injustice, prejudice, ignorance, and yes, the evil in our midst? Is it not also fair to say that we are in a spiritual battle against forces that divide, discriminate, and set people against each other? In the context of Paul's metaphor, do we not have an understanding, then, that these are among the demons we face around every corner, instead of literal ones? Do not our own efforts in living a life of faith encourage that we fight against oppressive structures in church and society? **Do we not, especially through education and mutual support, seek to protect and prepare ourselves for struggle, much like Paul's metaphorical description of soldiers who gird themselves not with actual helmets, shields, and swords, but with truth, righteousness, faith, and the word of God?** While I have a much better understanding, and even appreciation, for Paul's metaphorical image of the Church as a spiritual army, and Christians as spiritual soldiers, I still think that Christianity has used this imagery to do **way more harm than good** – especially in perpetuating the concept of a literal devil named Satan in the 21st century?

So when confronted with the negative effects of this often-dangerous militaristic metaphor, be reminded of Paul's original purpose: "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." (Eph. 6:15). That part of the metaphor is usually forgotten. Perhaps, then, that does make us soldiers of peace!

Amen.