

Some Metaphors Can Be Dangerous

“Put on the whole armor of God.” – Ephesians 6:11

Ephesians 6:10-20
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
August 26, 2018

Last Sunday, we met at Phillips Theological Seminary for a Combined Service with Fellowship Congregational and East Side Christian. We commented that the assigned lectionary Gospel reading from John 6 – about Jesus saying we must eat his flesh and drink his blood – was just plain gross. But instead of ignoring a scripture passage we don't like, we felt it's best to approach it head on.

I can say the same about today's Epistle reading from Ephesians 6. A big part of me detests this passage. To be more accurate, I detest what many have done with this passage in their approach to the Christian faith. I know from which I speak, because I use to be one of them.

During my fundamentalist years (from my late teens through my early 30s, when I went to seminary) I memorized this metaphorical image about putting on the 'whole armor of God' and recited it daily in prayers. I often wouldn't leave the house without going through the image of fastening a belt of truth around my waist, putting on the breastplate of righteousness, shoes that would make me ready to proclaim the gospel of peace, a shield of faith to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Thus protected, I'd step out into the day, convinced I was a **spiritual warrior for Jesus**, locked in a battle with the forces of darkness and evil – yes, with a literal Satan himself and his demons.

Now, **I'd like to suggest that there are some potentially dangerous down sides to taking this metaphor too literally. First, when you're sure there's an actual demon lurking around every corner it's not hard to convince yourself that you've found one – even within oneself.** For instance, any medical malady, such as depression or an addiction, is caused by actually being possessed by the demon of depression, the demon of addiction, the demon of whatever. If only that demon could be cast out, then the depression, addiction, or anything else would go away. And I'm not the only person who was convinced that being gay was caused by a demon of homosexuality. That's almost worse than being told you can pray the gay away because an actual exorcism is necessary.

Then there's the effects of living with a militaristic approach to a life of faith. For it's not a big leap to becoming *militant* toward those who you end up labeling as the enemy, or simply as an “outsider.” And sooner or later, with what I consider the biggest downside in my own experience, that militant approach inevitably turns inward, and can inflict some serious psychological and spiritual violence and abuse on oneself.

I would venture to guess that there are others here in this sanctuary today who have experienced something along these lines as well. Whether caught up in the Jesus Freak movement like myself in the early 1970s, or from a particular religious background that approached a life of faith in this militaristic way, **many of us have had to do a lot of internal work, with God's help, to de-program and free ourselves from its grasp.**

Submersing oneself in the language of warfare, battle, victories and defeats, and spiritual arsenals can cloud one's understanding of the true nature and character of God – as understood through the life and ministry of Jesus. For **Jesus is all about love, not war**. And God is not Zeus, lightning bolt in hand ready to smite puny earthlings.

It's said that many of the Jewish people in Jesus' day were expecting a militaristic Messiah, a king figure who would overthrow their Roman oppressors. **While many people in our day and age still hold onto this militarized superhero Jesus, that's not the kind of Messiah we ended up getting in Jesus**. Yet, the model of the Church as an "army of God" is still common in many religious circles, especially here in the Bible Belt.

In reaction to this particular militaristic approach to Christianity, others are trying hard 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 our 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, military language for God and the people of God isn't automatically bad or wrong in and of itself. That includes the metaphor of God as father. Rather, it is what people do and have done when literalizing those metaphors, as I used to do.**

Not surprisingly, Jesus didn't use any military references when he talked about the "kingdom of God." Saying that, the term "kingdom" is itself associated with being militaristic, and certainly patriarchal and hierarchical. That's why so many of us now use the term realm of God, or in an even more relational orientation, the kin-dom of God. But 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. But the intent was to bring about justice. And the Israelites no doubt saw themselves literally as God's army, often fighting and killing those they considered not be the "people of God." **They justified violence against their enemies because they convinced themselves that their enemies must also be God's enemies. This still happens today.**

By Jesus' day, however, that military imagery became less literal and more metaphorical, where the people of God were engaged more in a spiritual war than a physical war. After all, there was no point in raging an actual war to oust the Roman Empire from their land. **Spiritual warfare**, then, was the approach taken by the apostle Paul. But before we reject out of hand this militaristic metaphor for the Church we need to put it back into context and try to glean what may have been Paul's intent.

First and foremost, even though he compares followers of Jesus to what would have been the common image of a Roman soldier, Christians are *not* 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, having the right equipment, and being in unity with others – the marks of any good army. These same traits are important to us as a community of faith today.**

Take note that 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). **Do we not, as progressives, understand ourselves to be in a battle, of sorts? Not against other people different from ourselves, but against the powers of injustice, prejudice, ignorance, abuse, and issues such as inequality, sexism, and white supremacy. Is it not also fair to say that we are in a battle against any systemic structure, force, ideology, or**

government policy that seeks to divide, discriminate, oppress, and set people against each other? Yes, there is evil in our midst. And in the context of Paul's metaphor, these are among the 'demons' we face around every corner today, not literal ones?

Spiritual darkness is in operation wherever and whenever there is an attempt to thwart God's power of love in today's world. Through education, mutual support, and God's indwelling Presence, we must prepare ourselves for these struggles in our often-hostile world. **We must find the courage and boldness to stand fast, to resist, and to speak out** against what Paul calls "the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (v. 12).

I have a much better understanding now, and even appreciation, for Paul's metaphorical image of the Church as a spiritual army, and Christians as spiritual soldiers. Yet, I still think that Christianity has used this imagery to do way more harm than good – especially in perpetuating the concept of a literal being named Satan, and actual demons that can possess our body, mind, or spirit. But again, note the difference between literal demons and what we mean metaphorically by demonic forces, such as those mentioned earlier.

Therefore, when confronted with the negative effects of this often-dangerous militaristic metaphor, be reminded of **Paul's original purpose of putting on the whole armor of God: "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 often forgotten. May our voices and feet move us not to march in war against others, but to bear the good news of peace.

I want to close by mentioning that ultimately Paul was simply offering his version a prayer for God's protection. This is common and it holds the same purpose in the Celtic tradition known as **encircling prayers**. The most famous being the one known as St. Patrick's Breastplate. It closes with the words I use as a benediction to close most of our services of worship. It's meant to remind us that God goes before us, behind us, above us, below us, beside us, and within us. I think we all prefer this non-militaristic approach much better.

Amen.