

Drake, Aug. 6, 2017

Waging Peace; Standing Firm

Ephesians 6:10-20

All of us are pleased when we receive notes of encouragement. They give us that extra boost to help keep us going or to try to improve in the responsibilities we already carry. You and I may have had a hand in notes like this, but I admit, never have I received or written anything as extensive as the letters Paul wrote to various churches.

Paul begins his letter of encouragement to the Ephesians with several chapters of Christian doctrine in the first half of the letter. In the second half he gives practical advice on how our lives should change as a result of the teachings described in the first half. In chapter 4 and on we are encouraged to seek unity in the body of Christ, being patient and living at peace with one another. Then Paul gives instruction of how to live as children of light in our personal lives and with our families, letting go of our anger before the sun goes down. He gives counsel for respectful relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, slaves and masters.

Then we come to today's passage where we are invited to put on the full armor of God. This image of 'the armor of God' is not an image Paul has thought up. According to Tom Yoder Neufeld, writer of the Believers Church Bible Commentary on Ephesians, Paul is referring back to Isaiah 59 where God sees that there is no justice so he puts on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head before waging war on his enemies.

This military language is not exactly comfortable language for us as Anabaptist Christians. We would prefer to wage peace without the use of armor imagery. Yet if we consider the Old Testament context, from which Paul took this language, and the prison context in which he found himself, probably with Roman soldiers serving as guards, we begin to see this was language people would understand. Here in Ephesians, God's *whole armor* is not what God is wearing but what he provides the believer to protect him or her from evil attacks.

Paul, in writing to the Ephesians, was presenting the image of the church as the center of God's saving action. It was the church, the followers of Jesus, which was to be empowered to resist the powers of evil by putting on God's armor. The armor pieces would serve as defenses to help fend off the attacks of evil from powers great and small, personal and impersonal, individual and part of larger systems. As the writers of my Study Bible state, there is no suggestion of armor protects that the back of the person; Paul made no provision for running away from a spiritual battle. In other words we need to be prepared to face this battle head-on.

Paul identifies five defenses as follows, namely:

- Truth
- Righteousness/justice
- Peace
- Faithfulness
- Salvation/liberation

These defenses will help us to stand firm as we face the schemes of evil coming at us.

And then he presents one offensive weapon, namely the

- Spirit/word of God as the sword to cut through the attack.

It would seem that this passage, which speaks of standing up to the power of darkness, is every bit as relevant today as it was in Paul's day. One just has to listen to one news cast to recognise that justice and truth are rare these days.

As I studied this passage, I found Tom Yoder Neufeld's Ephesians commentary on the pieces of God's armor very helpful and want to credit him for inspiring the thoughts I will be sharing here.

1) Truth (14a)

When I was growing up, my parents emphasized honesty and truth telling. I believe this had been impressed upon them as children as well, not just because it is a good thing to do, but because they had grown up in a faith community that believed truth was part of the nature of God's presence in the world. It was important in how we were to behave with one another. Our word was to be trustworthy.

Tom Yoder Neufeld goes further and suggests, and I quote, "Truth is a way in which God intervenes in a world whose culture is best characterized as *the lie*." This really struck me because of what we have been hearing during and since the last U.S. Presidential election. It struck me because of the news we hear coming out of Turkey where journalists and university professors and others who challenge the system are thrown into jail for speaking their truth. It struck me because we question the honesty of many of the promises we hear from governments and big businesses, and sometimes even local encounters. It's challenging to address these issues. Speaking the truth to authorities seems to be highly conflictual and is often vigorously resisted. Yet this is what we are called to do, and organizations like Sojourners and others continue to be that prophetic truth speaking voice calling us to speak to the authorities today.

Paul tells us to put on truth, like a belt that will keep our clothing in place, to resist the darkness that bombards us.

2) Breastplate of Righteousness/Justice (14b)

Righteousness and justice are about doing the right thing; about intervening on behalf of those who are being victimized. Often when people speak out for justice, they are

intimidated by those who have great wealth and wield great power. Working for justice means one has to ward off considerable criticism.

Some time ago I read the autobiography of Nelson Mandela. Part of his story included his struggle for justice for black South Africans. It helped me to understand the kind of personal strength required to withstand the accusations and personal attacks that can come when one speaks up for the dispossessed. It seems that as Christians we have a very great responsibility wearing the breastplate of righteousness and being a voice that speaks to the injustices in our world.

We don't have to look far to see that speaking out for justice is not necessarily popular. When issues of injustice are raised regarding the treatment of our First Nations peoples or of newer immigrants to Canada or of people on welfare, we find attitudes that do not fit Paul's exhortations to the churches of his day and ours.

3) Peace (15) is the third point Paul makes. It is the central message of Ephesians. In verse 15 he uses the walking motif suggesting that we need good footwear to walk in the way of peace if it is to spread. Peace is active, not passive. It requires getting up and getting involved with others. The possibilities are limitless. Earlier in chapter 4 he said, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." It is important to seek peace in our relationships whether that be our biological families, our faith families or beyond. Political powers talk about peace, but many wage war in the process. We need to wage peace.

This past week I attended the funeral of a 94 year old man who had been a CO during the II World War. In the reflections, comments were shared about some of the ridicule he had experienced for taking that stand. Walking the way of peace is challenging. Jesus showed us that it could mean great sacrifice, yet clearly his walk has left us with a lasting message and example.

Earlier this year, Michael Sharp, a former MCC worker and then UN worker, was abducted in Congo. It became well known that he had been working very effectively encouraging young soldiers to give up their arms and going home as a way to bring peace to the region. In the end he and others of his team were killed because their work was a threat to those seeking to rule by force. Walking the way of peace can be costly.

4) Shield of Faith or Faithfulness (16)

To have faith in God means to have a belief in God. *Faithfulness* is the result of having faith. It requires trust and confidence in God's power. It calls us to take a stand when we see injustice around us. It can be carried out in so many different ways.

This past winter after the U.S. election we were noticing the effect negative news was having on people at church. Many people were feeling down from listening to media reports. How could we be faithful to God in these circumstances? We decided to begin looking for good news stories and to send letters of encouragement to individuals or groups who doing good for others or being a positive voice in their communities. We

wrote letters of commendation to a restaurant owner in Emerson, MB who took in and fed immigrants who had walked across the border in the cold of winter; to a restaurant hostess in B.C. who picked up the tab for a family having a supper together before the young daughter began another round of chemo; to a school group from southern SK who raised money and helped out at Ronald MacDonald House as part of a We Day project; and to our AMBS staff for committing themselves to *right remembering* and *faithful action* to name a few. It was a small action of faith but it got us looking past the dominant voices that were pulling people down, and for two people who responded back, we were told it had encouraged them.

5) Salvation/Liberation (17a)

Paul uses the image of a helmet of salvation, imitating God in Is. 59 in bringing liberation to those in bondage. Nowadays we all know that helmets are made to protect our heads, whether when riding a bike, playing hockey or any number of other activities. A helmet of salvation, it would seem, protects us from the onslaught of negative messages I mentioned earlier. As a source of defense, the helmet reminds us that we protect our minds from all that can harm it. With the helmet of salvation one chooses to focus on what is life-giving, providing a source of liberation and hope for those who are struggling.

The helmet of salvation is particularly important in our world where social media has invaded our lives. We can be bombarded with information, true or fake. Modern technology can serve us or it can enslave us. It requires discipline to manage it without being controlled by it.

6) Finally Paul mentions an armor piece that is used as an offensive weapon, namely a sword, here referring to the Spirit/Word of God (17b). The writer to the Hebrews referred to God's word like a two-edged sword. Effective use of scripture has a way of cutting to the heart of matters.

Paul concludes this section of chapter 6 with a strong appeal for the importance of **prayer** on all occasions. Prayer has a way of connecting us to another's struggle. I often find this happens on Sunday mornings following sharing time. Someone has experienced the death of a family member. Someone else is struggling with a cancer diagnosis. Another is finding relationships challenging in the workplace. Yet another is struggling with mental health issues. Prayer has a way of engaging us in those struggles, and often provides promptings of the spirit which nudge us to take action in the week to come. Perhaps it's a phone call of support, a meal, a card, taking time for a coffee together. Paul says, "Be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints." In a similar way we need to pray for justice and peace in our world. As Tom Yoder Neufeld says, "We can never overcome the powers left to our own devices, but must be vigilant in praying for power, courage and insight."

This week in the Mennonite Church Canada News release there was an article by Miriam Tshimanga who is serving as a Mennonite Church Canada witness worker in S.

Africa with her husband Hippolyto. She wrote of a prayer meeting on April 22 where a million people came together to pray for the country. I quote from her letter:

The prayer meeting came about in response to a video clip posted on social media by a middle-aged farmer. Speaking in Afrikaans, the farmer noted that God had sent rain in abundance when the country prayed for rain, and he pleaded with Angus Buchan, a well-known evangelist and writer, to call the country together to pray for peace. And then he said in English, “Uncle Angus, we are waiting for you. Say the word and we will come.”

Buchan took up the challenge, sent out the invitation and responded saying, “We are asking God to change the heart of our beloved nation, beginning with our own hearts.” He went on to say, “We will ask the Lord to bring justice, peace and hope in our beloved South Africa.”

Tshimanga continues, “One million people came and fell to their knees for a time of personal prayer followed by a communal prayer from Buchan. He prayed that God might end crime and racism in the country. After each prayer item, the crowd shouted a powerful “amen” and Shofars (ram’s horns) echoed across the field.

Prayer in this way is somewhat foreign to us, yet it seems that the power of coming together and praying in solidarity with fellow strugglers has an amazing effect on all involved as well as on the powers that observe the gathering.

Often we are timid in sharing the message of God’s peace and love. Paul invited the Ephesians to pray that he might be bold and fearless as he shared the mystery of the good news. I wonder what would happen if we prayed this for one another as we take seriously our responsibility of addressing the powers on issues where we see injustices being carried out. Tom Yoder Neufeld says, “The powers are threatened by a prayerful community exercising truth, justice, peace and courageous speaking of the word of God.”

May we heed Pauls’ message to the Ephesians and take on God’s armor of truth, justice, peace, faithfulness, and a helmet of salvation and commit ourselves to prayer and action in solidarity for one another and with the struggling in our world.