

“The whole armor of God”

August 23, 2009

Text: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18, Ephesians 6:10-20

I

It’s a dangerous world out there, isn’t it? I mean think of all the things we have to contend with! The things we do to one another ...

1. The senseless acts of violence and intimidation—like bullying, for example, which has apparently become a national epidemic;
2. Or the general rudeness and craziness trying to navigate the streets and highways of South Florida.
3. And recently, the acts of intimidation and inappropriate behaviors at some of the town hall meetings to discuss and debate Health Care reform.

It’s a dangerous world. **Ephesians** understands this. Early on in our reading, the author—probably one of Paul’s disciples—says we have to be *strong in the Lord ... so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil*.

Devil talk is strong talk. Whatever the devil is, it is the source evil, of malevolence. It is the dark force in the world that works against the forces of light and neighbor love that seek to exalt and lift up life.

Fortunately, however, **Ephesians** doesn’t leave us there. The author offers a solution: That we put on *the whole armor of God*.

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

This is our protection against the evils of our day. To stand firm, utilizing *the whole armor of God*. What is this armor?

It is armor that proclaims the gospel of peace. This peace *is* God’s truth and God’s righteousness. It is a shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. Centered on peace, these are *the whole armor of God*.

What all of this signals is that there are places we need to stand in our lives, places where we must stand to respond to the *wiles of the devil* that rise up from time to time in the human spirit.

Ephesians can’t say this too strongly: *It’s important that we stand firm*; that we remain resolute, not yielding to the dark forces that at times build up on the horizon.

II.

In a reflection on our reading from **Ephesians** this morning, UCC minister, Matt Fitzgerald, talks about *Parting Waters*, the first volume of **Taylor Branch's** history of the civil rights movement.

In the book, there is a shocking photo of a lunch counter in Nashville. A white man and a white woman are sitting with an African-American woman. Their backs are turned to an angry mob gathered right there behind them. The photo reveals how their waiter has just poured a bottle of ketchup over the white man's head.

In the black and white photograph, the ketchup looks like blood as it drips down the man's jacket. You can see his clenched jaw and tightened right fist. No doubt, more than anything, he wants to unleash his fury on the jeering mob. But he doesn't move. He sits still.

In the eyes of the world, he may be viewed as weak and helpless, armed with nothing but the gospel of peace, as abuse after abuse is heaped upon him. But inside his heart and spirit, an inner strength is building.

The eyes of the crowd in this photo are insane, lit up like cosmic powers of that dark time. One man has a sugar jar in his hand and a joyful smile on his face as he pours its contents over the black woman's head. Nearby, a middle-aged man looks on approvingly.

It's a revealing photo. But that's not all.

To the right, at the far edge of the photo, there is a member of the mob who looks ashamed of this ugly scene. He is a young man with his eyes downcast, his face tormented. You can't miss his presence. The look on his face has turned to pain. Something has happened.

No doubt, when he first arrived, he was caught up in the mob mentality of *attack and deride, attack and deride*. But then, the two white and one black protesters, sitting at the counter, didn't play the game; but, rather, they stood firm with ***the whole armor of God***, enduring the abuse, not responding in kind.

What is unique about this photo is how it somehow captured *the* moment when some part of this young man was changed—slain forever by the power of love and the full armor of God.

Again, standing firm armed with ***the whole armor of God*** sends a powerful message. It's the message that the gospel of peace and love, the gospel of loving our enemies and turning the other cheek is a formidable force to contend with.

It touches the human heart; and through what the world might first see as weakness, strength rises up.

III.

What this photo reminds us is that there are places where we need to take a stand in our lives. The *wiles of the devil*—strong language, I agree—are always eager to challenge God’s armor and test its will to stand firm against the forces of evil.

These forces are sometimes offhand and seemingly trivial—like the ugly language people use, sometimes in casual conversation, to dehumanize blacks, other ethnic groups and people in the gay and lesbian community. Offensive slurs; we’ve all heard them.

Other times, like in some of the recent town hall meetings around the country, the forces of evil are not subtle.

Let’s tell some truth about how evil works, these *wiles of the devil*. One of the most common forms of evil today is pandering to the lowest impulses of people—people who are confused and perhaps not well informed.

All they know is that, suddenly, the economy is bad ... and they either don’t have a job or they’re worried about losing the job they have ... and all around them, it seems, things are changing.

And then they turn on some conservative talk radio station and hear some ranting talk show host telling them, in grandiose hyperbole, the source of all their worry, the cause of all their concern:

- It’s the government ... and some irrational fear of an emerging socialism (which we’ve had, to some extent, for decades with Social Security and Medicare, which have worked fine).
- And added to this, now, all the fury over Health Care Reform, which we all know we need (more than 75% of the American people agree on this).
- Still more, they hear wild, totally unfounded talk about *death panels* and government take over.

Distortions ... exaggerations ... lies ...

And one day, some of them decide to attend a town hall meeting in their state on Health Care Reform and they see signs of swastikas and photos equating national leaders with Hitler. And they start thinking, however irrationally, that the government is evil and our national leaders are evil. And if we could just get rid of government and all this new leadership, their lives would be okay again.

This is how evil works. It panders to the lower and more vulnerable impulses of people. It distorts and conflates ... in ways that evoke horrifically wrong and misguided conclusions. These are scary times, friends.

A word on the role of government. The function of government, in part, is to protect us against ourselves, against our tendencies to exploit, to look out too much for ourselves and to mistreat one another. That's what laws and regulations are all about.

Simply put, we human beings need regulation because in its absence, sin rises up in the form of greed and illusions of power. And sometimes it rises up to where we invade Iraq or fall into a housing foreclosure epidemic that takes our economy to its knees.

IV.

Ephesians knows about evil and the forces of darkness. And it urges us to stand firm, putting on *the whole armor of God*.

The time to speak out against evil forces is before those forces escalate to produce some tragic result. With the mounting tension over Health Care and other concerns about the economy and the role of government, we're on the edge of some frightening times. For a close observer, there are some scary trends surrounding these town hall meetings.

At their best, town hall meetings ought to be a good thing. They ought to represent some of the best of the American spirit. They ought to be an open forum where people of good will can come and discuss and debate important issues of our day, matters that impact our lives.

People have every right to express their concerns and their dissent. But don't they need to do it in a manner that is civil and appropriate to a public forum? And do they need to come armed with loaded guns or rifles? Sometimes don't we wonder, *What's the matter with us? What's happening to us?*

V.

Much of this is fomented by conservative talk radio (not all of it, of course, but some of it for sure) with its narrow agenda of status quo and greed. Friends, this is not post-world War II America when we were at our peak of popularity and moral righteousness. It's a different world; and our role in the world is different. Our national demographics have changed and are continuing to change even more.

And the challenge before us—with these economically stressful times and all of the uncertainty that surrounds the economy (all the more reason why we need to reform our Health Care system; it's bankrupting us financially) ... the challenge before us is to find ways of coming together as a nation ...

- The polarization of America in recent decades, friends, is leading us down a path that does not have a happy ending.
- These town hall meetings should be opportunities to build consensus as we seek to move forward as a nation, and not occasions to further divide and separate us.

As a nation and as Americans, we have a tremendous heritage and history to build on. Courageous men and women who have gone before us that we might enjoy the freedoms and the prosperity of the abundance that is ours and for which we should be eternally grateful.

In recent decades, we've been slipping, not adjusting well to much of the change that is all about us. We've got to do better than we've been doing. We're on the edge of losing it, of falling off some slippery slope into even further polarization and division.

We must do better!

And we can ... and we will ... by doing as **Ephesians** exhorts us, as Christians: to *proclaim and live out the gospel of peace*.

- And to love one another ... and do unto others as we would want them to do to us. It can't just be all about us ... and our needs and our insecurities. It's got to be about everybody. Every human being deserves a place at the table of God's grace.
- This *is* the gospel of Jesus Christ; that all people are sacred in God's sight, deserving of the basic necessities of life—adequate food, shelter, and health care.
- Always, friends, it's all about the love; how God has loved us in Christ and how we are to take this love out into the world.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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