

Dressed for Success

Ephesians 6:10-20

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Today is the fourth in our series of texts from the letter to Ephesians, in it Paul gives several pieces of advice on how to live the new Christian life, as distinct from the old pagan life (4:17-6:9). In this text (6:10-20), Paul also gives advice on Christian spiritual warfare. I believe the last time we examined this text was three years ago when my ideas for dressed for success was around the idea of how to dress to participate in the Olympic Games, and how fashions have changed over the years to make sure that athletes are aided rather than hindered by their clothing as they race in hopes of receiving the prize of a gold, silver or bronze medal. But morning, I understand this scripture in a new light because of the world in which we live. Paul reminds us that we do not take up arms against the "enemies of blood and flesh" (6:12), but against "the wiles of the devil," struggles "against the rulers...authorities...cosmic powers...[and] the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (6:11, 12).

It may be difficult to get our heads around the situations that the community of Christians, called "Ephesians," may have faced. They lived somewhere in Asia Minor during the first two centuries of the Common Era. They were religious minorities in the Roman Empire as Christianity was illegal until 313. Though this letter does not mention a particular persecution, these Christians faced daily harassment and discrimination from their neighbors and possible suppression by the authorities. In Ephesus, they may have been taken to worship the emperor at the newly constructed temple of Domitian to test their allegiance. Ephesus was also a thriving commercial city and the cultic center of goddess Artemis. New Christian converts continued to use their Greco-Roman Platonic cosmology to understand their new religion. The church is understood to be raised up with Christ in heavenly places (2:6) because they believed between the heavens and the earth, spirits and powers swirl. So, while they grew spiritually into a dwelling place for God (2:22), Christians must go through transformation. They must shed their former pagan selves and immoral lifestyle (2:3; 4:17-19; 5:3-5), and understanding, and put on their new selves of godly righteousness and holiness (4:22-24), and trust in God. Christian individuals, households, and communities were to become morally exemplary, living in love, forgiveness, and thankfulness.

To live such a Christian life in the predominantly pagan world posed challenges to the "Ephesians." One of the major challenges that these early Christians experienced in their transformation concerned power. Roman civilization was built on militarism. Yet Christians were called not to bear arms against any human agents, because their battle was a spiritual one. Their true enemies were sin, evil, and death, forces that constantly waged war in their inner spirit and at the cosmic level. In this spiritual warfare God in Christ through the Spirit supplies to Christians power and strength (1:19; 3:16), and Christians are "to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power" (6:10).

If this message was understood, we Christians would be exemplary peacemakers. But the history of the Christian church reveals a bewildering array of Christian violence, in which the rhetoric of spiritual warfare against the dark forces of evil became literal warfare. No early Christians took up weapons against their persecutors, and many died as martyrs. Yet by 325, when Christianity became legalized, Christians persecuted "other" Christians. In the process of establishing Nicene and Chalcedonian standards of our faith, the "orthodox" Christians brutally punished the "heretics." At the third ecumenical council at Ephesus in 431, two parties of Christians (later Monophysites and Nestorians) confronted each other bitterly, calling each other tools of the devil because they had different understandings of the person and nature of Christ. In medieval Crusades, European Christian soldiers slaughtered Jews, Muslims, and "heretics" (i.e., the Eastern Christians), believing that they were slaughtering the forces of evil. In 1492 devout Catholic Iberian crowns sent Columbus to "discover" the world while expelling God's enemy, that is, Jews and Muslims, from their domain. Likewise, Protestant Reformers approved the state right of execution of those whom the church perceived as the enemies of God, including "Turks," "Jews," "Christian heretics," and "witches." In the ensuing years, Christian Europe justified the conquest, colonization, and forced Christianization of those dark "savages" of the Americas, as well as the enslavement of some Asians and numerous Africans using the similar rhetoric.

According to historian Kathleen E. McVey, the church's three basic positions about war—pacifism, just war, and holy war—are all based on the biblical interpretation of spiritual warfare against the powers of "this present darkness" (6:12). With McVey, we learn: "Historical study undermines the illusion, perhaps still widespread among Christians, that theirs and ours is a history of peace while others, such as Muslims, have 'lived by the sword.'"

But there are examples of Christians who have taken up the "warfare of peace." Christians in the French village of Le Chambon sur Ligno hid and protected 5,000 Jewish children in World War II. Martin Luther King Jr. preached the "more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31) of love and nonviolent protest.

The message to the Ephesians is clear that in the middle of our fierce fighting, Christians bring the gospel of peace (6:15), and "the whole armor of God" is only for our protection (v. 13). The only offensive gear is the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (v. 17). The writer transforms common gear of military warfare into new Christian terms of spiritual warfare. Confident in the great power of God (1:19), giving up weapons of destruction, Christians are to move forward, in whatever good shoes we have (6:15), in proclaiming the gospel of peace.

Where do you see the spiritual darkness operating against God's power of love in today's world? In our own minds, or in the embodied "others"? Last week I heard of two tragic situations: a Wayne County Sheriff Deputy was running in a public park and was hit and dragged, and died from his injuries by a hit and run driver. He had spent his career in law enforcement and had just put in his papers for retirement. On Friday I discovered that his wife is a friend and colleague of my next door neighbor. This made things personally close. Even closer, last Monday my son George called to ask me to put Asante, his nephew by marriage. The young man was the highest ranking ROTC officer at Morehouse College two years ago. He attended officer training and was fast moving up the ranks. He was most recently assigned to an aircraft carrier. He last reported for duty on Friday, but did not report back at the end of his duty on Saturday. A thorough search of the carrier did not find him and two officers came to his parents to say that he was missing in action and they were searching the sea for him. On Thursday the search and rescue was called off, and now the family is planning his funeral. We have all experienced illness, death, suicide of friends or family members, substance abuse,

depression, mental illness, addictions to all kinds of things. These are real and none of us is exempt from these issues of life. If you haven't experience them yet, the changes are you will.

Spiritual resources enable us to stand firm and endure in the struggle—against systemic forces, "the principalities,...the powers,...[the] rulers of this present darkness" (6:12 RSV). Among these spiritual resources are "truth,...righteousness [or right relations],...the gospel of peace,...and faith" (6:14-16). We Christians are to be extremists of love, peace, and boldness (6:20) in bringing peace in these present evil days (5:16). **Haruko Nawata Ward**

Paul tells us the dress for success by putting on the whole armor of God and pray for each other.

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