

“Put On the Amor of God With Prayer”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – 23 August 2009  
Ephesians 6:10-20

In an age of anxiety, in which people are monopolized by their fears, and the social fabric has disintegrated into course brutality, we need now more than ever, in the words of Paul, to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.” Paul perceived with a keener insight than most that our conflict is not so much with other people as it is with spiritual forces of darkness; forces impartial to party or position; equal opportunity forces that thrive upon and strive to incite deceit, destruction, and terror wherever possible.

Paul saw how misdirection serves as the principal tactic of dark spiritual forces. In football parlance, think of a trick play where the defense is made to look the wrong way. In the case of our lives and our world, though, it is no game. “The cosmic powers of this present darkness” stir us to hatred by enflaming our imaginations with an exaggerated sense of vulnerability. “The spiritual forces of evil” then prey on our sense of helplessness and fill the void carved out by fear with anger and desperation.

None of this can happen unless we leave off the armor of God: the belt of truth; the breastplate of righteousness, the footwear of peace; the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation. Too often we leave ourselves open to the assaults of spiritual emptiness, because we neglect to wear the garments we’ve been given that can help deflect lies, wickedness, fury, and fear. The armor of God, like any armor, is hot and heavy, uncomfortable to wear. It chafes and restricts our movement. The temptations are legion to leave off the armor, but to do so spells our doom. Yet the armor always stands ready for those willing to wear it, and we have the brave example of

those who have gone before to inspire us; those who have survived solely because they strapped on the only armor capable of blunting the force of evil.

Of course, everything said so far may be true and good, but what practical application do the words of Paul have for our day to day life? Well, there are an abundance of issues to choose from, but at the risk of scratching an open sore, perhaps we should consider health care.

In the United States at present, we ration medical care according to affluence. By and large, the more you've got, the more you get. There are exceptions. People who have had served our country in the armed forces for a certain period of time, or who have been disabled by their service, receive good healthcare, and this is a godly thing, because it shows justice. Likewise, some employees work for employers who do not regard their employees as dispensable or easily replaceable, and those employees receive healthcare. This is godly, because it shows mercy and values the individual person for more than their mere utility. Or for the more cynical, at least we can say that an enlightened sense of self-interest is at play.

However, this leaves many millions, including children, who have little or no access to the resources they need to receive healing. For this to be the case in the most prosperous nation the world has ever known strikes me as decidedly ungodly, especially when there are more than a few nations, which ironically are predominantly secular not religious, that provide a basic measure of healthcare to all of their citizens, without running up enormous debt or going bankrupt or practicing euthanasia. Indeed, those countries tend to do better than us on a number of key indicators when it comes to the quality of healthcare provided, measured by vital statistics like infant mortality rates.

Some blame insurance companies, which are portrayed as unscrupulous, greedy monsters, more interested in high profits than healthy people, and perhaps this is true of some,

though I doubt it is true of all, and the accusation probably proves false for most. I will not pretend to understand the intricacies of the health insurance industry.

Others believe the blame falls on employers, whose ambition and voraciousness leads them to cut corners until they strike bone, and maybe this is true of some, though certainly not all, and likely more than a few employers genuinely feel they have little choice between being competitive and being compassionate. I will not pretend to know the details of every employer's balance sheet.

Many blame the government, particularly when the party in power is not the one we prefer. We either make them out as closet socialists or the cronies of capitalism, and in both cases, we allege that they are all corrupt, which if true, means that the American public is corrupt, since they got in office by election. If that it is not true that the American public is corrupt, then at the very least, our way of choosing our leadership has been corrupted. I suspect there are crooks on both sides of the aisle, and that both the donkey and the elephant have unsung heroes making sacrifices to do what's right and good. It's easy to judge public servants who wield such enormous power over us. It's easy to judge because very few of us have ever experienced anything like it, and we presume that put in their position, we would do better, while having no idea what the pressures must be like for people, who in some instances are responsible for representing the interests of millions of people.

For those of us inclined to blame somebody for the big mess that healthcare in this country has indisputably become, we often turn to a small but influential group of well-paid opinionated people with a hanker for rancor; commentators who offer little in the way of any realistic, constructive solution; people who more and more confuse the volume of their voice with the soundness of their argument; people who mistake the outrageousness of an accusation

with its truth, shouting “Nazi! Nazi! Nazi!” I would defend to the death their First Amendment right to freedom of speech, but with every right comes an obligation to use it responsibly, and too many have seized the right and eschewed the responsibility, poisoning the minds of many, contribute little if any substance toward a constructive solution, and dividing the body politic beyond the bounds of common civility. And yet if no one listened or watched or logged on to the inflammatory blog, these people wouldn’t be important at all, would they? So who is to blame, really?

In the midst of such extraordinary confusion, the belt of truth could come in handy, though like Pontius Pilate at the trial of Jesus, we wonder, “What is truth?” It’s a complicated matter, because the truth of God is love, and we all know how complicated love can get. How do we practice love in way that brings forth truth? If we flip back a few chapters in Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, we may find our answer.

“So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” [4:25-26, 29, 31 – 5:2]

If Paul words aren’t precise enough, then try this. Ask God while you worship here to give you grace to forgive whoever it is you blame for the problems we suffer as a society. Go home and pray for the politicians, the pundits, and the plutocrats that infuriate you most. Pray

that God will guide them to use their power for the purpose of justice and peace. Ignore people who get make a living by doing nothing more than making you angry. Ignore them for your spiritual health. Seek out those who view an issue differently, and engage with them in an honest and forthright discussion, humbly and respectfully seeking what is best without fear for your own self-interest. Be careful about assuming that you know more than you really do. Don't judge people. And pray: pray, pray, pray, pray, pray. That's how Paul started the conclusion of his Letter to the Ephesians. "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayers and supplication."

Through prayer we don the armor, piece by precious piece. Through prayer we endure the armor's weight and its constraints. Through prayer we do not flinch when evil arrows fly, because we know that God will protect us. Through prayer we find peace beyond compare, and the strength to stand and share that peace with others in the power of God. In an age of anxiety, in which people are monopolized by their fears, and the social fabric has disintegrated into course brutality, we need now more than ever, God calls Christians to pray and put on the armor, to stop the blame and seek sensible solutions, to show how love, not hate, truly conquers all. Amen.

