

Appropriately Dressed

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Dr. J. Stewart Hardy

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22;
Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:55-69

(I have chosen this morning to speak on the reading from Ephesians.)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Stew, you’ll need a few things for Monday night. You’ll need skates, a helmet, some sort of shin pads and a stick. You can get them all at the Canadian Tyre Store up on St. Claire. They’re having a sale.” I had just arrived in Canada to study at the University of Toronto, where some faculty and graduate students were forming a hockey team and since I could skate (I had learned in New Zealand on natural ice, not that wimpy indoor rink ice), I was invited to join the team. I was ecstatic.

“You’re going to need a few things” Paul writes to the Ephesians, “if you are really going to stay the course as Christian.”

You see, the reality is that being Christian is not an easy matter at all. Just look at the end of the gospel lesson this morning. There were some disciples who left because they couldn’t handle the challenge of Jesus’ teaching, not to mention surviving as Christians in the real world. Paul’s point is simple and straightforward: Christians in general, and the Ephesians in particular, really need protection in the rough and tumble of every day life if they are to remain faithful to their calling.

In our day and age I think we have become lulled into a false sense of ease and security in our faith. It seems to me that we are inclined to think that, as Americans, we are all Christian to some degree and that living our faith and living in our culture are one and the same.

It seems as though that may have been the way the Ephesians thought about themselves. But Paul was concerned that subtle forces so destructive of faith were abundant in the world and great care had to be taken to defend against them.

Had Paul lived in our time he might have talked about the helmet, shoulder pads, mouth guard, etc. worn by a football player to enable him to play effectively. But Paul lived in a time where the Roman military was everywhere and their battle dress was known by one and all. What better example could Paul have when talking about Christians equipping themselves to face the powerful forces that were at play contesting God’s sovereignty and undermining Christian faith and community? What they need, Paul writes, is “the armor of God.”

So Paul writes of the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. It makes for a fine illustration of the Christian as strapping Roman soldier, the backbone of the mightiest army in the known world, ready to take on all comers and beat them into submission. Such imagery encourages and lends itself to an image of a combative church ready to subdue a wicked world.

So it is that some Christians spend more energy protesting abortion clinics than they do opening their homes and their wallets to promoting the adoption of “unwanted” babies. “Preachers” visit university campuses and busy city street corners, armed with megaphones and yelling messages of fire, brimstone and damnation at drunkards, idolaters and the sexually immoral. Some Christian leaders hyper-spiritualize their politics, even to the point of calling for the assassination of anti-American foreign leaders. And the ones that really irritate me are those who proclaim their faith through fish symbols on bumper stickers, and then cut people off rather than letting them merge in front of them onto 581.

All of which misses the point. Paul is trying to show the Ephesians, and since we read his letter to them, us, that they are vulnerable to debilitating and deadly forces which range themselves against the will of God. Every Christian, if she or he is to survive and not quit, needs protection. That protection, Paul is saying, comes with the armor of God, which is something like the armor Roman soldiers wore. Truth, righteousness, faith, the gospel, the Scriptures, these are not weapons with which to go careening into crowds, they’re the armor of our defense. They shore up our position as balanced and authentic followers of Christ. They defend us from our own folly and hypocrisy.

Folly. It is such a painful word for me to hear. One of the hockey games we played was over at St. Michael’s College on the campus of the University of Toronto. Our team had a pick up game with the faculty and students from St. Michael’s. And what a game it was. Half time came and the score was even. We went on to the ice for the second half. And there I was, red of face, and sweating (even then)! The helmet I wore made my head feel as though it were about to burst into flame. Telling myself what a great player I was, I threw my helmet onto the bench and the game began!

Hockey one, hockey two, hockey three. That’s the last thing I remember of that game. The next thing I remember is a masked face looking at me and saying, “O.K. One more stitch will do it then we’ll get you upstairs and keep you at least a day just to make sure.”

The puck had struck me on my left eyebrow where the helmet ought to have been. I was so fortunate to have gotten off with only five stitches and a headache that lasted a week. I had cast aside the defense that would have protected me. It was my last ice hockey game . . . Barbara saw to that!

“Put on the armor of God” Paul writes, which calls to mind his exhortation to “put on Christ.” Might it not be that the armor of God is indeed putting on Christ, living, acting and speaking as if we were Christ? Scripture does tell us that God is truth, that Christ is perfect righteousness and our salvation. Fostering our intimacy with God in and through Christ, worship, prayer, personal

daily devotions – aren't these our congregational goals? – is the very means of putting on the armor of God.

Paul leads us by concluding his inventory of the armor with a call to prayer. "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication." Our defense may not look purpose-driven, but it most certainly is prayer-driven intimacy with the one who protects us with his very presence. Then and only then are we able to live the Christian style of life, a style which the world will observe and by which it will measure us accordingly.

As Brennan Manning, a United States Marine and Korean War veteran who is now a monk and a widely read author, observes "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, then walk out the door and deny him by their lifestyle. That's what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable." How subtle, the forces arrayed against Christians and their God.

So through Christ, God gifts us with clothing that protects and identifies and unifies. How might this look in real life? Perhaps, something like this.

In one of his books, Norman Vincent Peale tells a story that appeared in a Chattanooga, Tennessee newspaper, of four women in a dress shop, three clerks and one customer. The customer was in a dressing room putting on her clothes after trying on several new dresses. All of a sudden the shop door burst open and in came a big tough-looking man, a knife in one hand and a revolver in the other.

"Hand over your money," he ordered. All the three women clerks could put together was fifty-five dollars, which enraged him. "Lie down on the floor, and if you make a move, I'll kill you." Then he heard the woman in the dressing room. He pushed and manhandled her, taking her money. He threatened her and cut her slightly with his knife.

Then the woman reacted. Pulling herself to full height, she said in a strong, authoritative voice to the marauder, "Stop this. In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to leave us alone. Stop this wickedness!" A look of astonishment came over the thief's face. Bewildered, he turned and ran from the shop, leaped into a car where a woman accomplice was at the wheel, and sped away.

Later he was arrested by police, and when interrogated, he said, "That woman had a power like I've never seen before."

Amen.