

WITH WHOM ARE WE BATTLING

On a recent visit to Ohio, our grandkids went to the Cleveland Museum of Art. When they returned to our home I asked what stood out to them and after a little prodding discovered it was the armor court. Our passage this morning for Ephesians would appear to indicate that Christians are called to similarly “suit up” for battle admonishing us to “Put on the whole armor of God.” I imagine this charge seems as puzzling to us as it did to its earliest readers who saw helmets and breastplates, shields and swords every day on the Roman soldiers who kept folks in line. Putting on armor to go up against riot police is not likely to end well. On top of that, if we’ve learned anything over time it’s that whatever armor we design, it eventually proves penetrable by the next generation of weaponry. UCC pastor Matt Fitzgerald notes that while

there is a helmet for every mace, a breastplate for every dagger and a shield for every sword ... we know the truth: our armor always loses because our weapons are consistently one step ahead of our protection... We can wrap ourselves in wonderful, fine-hammered metal, but every suit of armor has its imperfections, and our warring nature finds and exploits them

So how is armor a solution for anything, particularly the battle we field today?: battles over getting the vaccine or not getting the vaccine, wearing masks or not wearing masks, believing the system is rigged by voter fraud or that the system is rigged by voter suppression, fearing immigrants or embracing them, advocating for individual rights or communal responsibility There is so much rage in our country these days and it is literally killing us. We are at battle with one another, often within the same community. Perhaps this why the author of Ephesians is careful to state at the outset:

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.

I think that’s a tough paragraph for mainline Protestants and enlightened Progressives to get their heads around. We’re not sure what to do with such talk of cosmic powers and spiritual forces. We may believe in God but we act most of the time as though God is largely ineffectual in dealing with real world problems and that it is up to us to solve things on our own. If only we could just convince enough people to think and act like us the world would be a better place. The danger of this conviction is that it can grossly underestimate the power of forces beyond individual moral agency. As New Testament scholar Susan Grove Eastman notes:

the self is never on its own but always socially and cosmically constructed in relationship to external realities that operate internally as well.” Consequently, sin is not “a decision made by self-determining individuals, but rather a socially mediated power greater than human beings yet operative through human thoughts, words, and deeds

In other words, our ability to make moral choices is significantly influenced by the forces around us. A recent Yale study reveals that social media actually amplifies this problem:

Social media platforms like Twitter amplify expressions of moral outrage over time because users learn such language gets rewarded with an increased number of “likes” and “shares.”

The team found that the incentives of social media platforms like Twitter really do change how people post. Users who received more “likes” and “retweets” when they expressed outrage in a tweet were more likely to express outrage in later posts.

The researchers also found:

that members of politically extreme networks expressed more outrage than members of politically moderate networks. However, members of politically moderate networks were actually more influenced by social rewards.

That’s why we talk about things like “systemic racism” that can direct us to policies and laws that have been put in place over years and years and have so enmeshed us that all of us are in some way complicit. It also means that when what Paul Krugman calls the “rage of the responsible” takes hold of us within the vaxing and masking debates we need to take a step back and consider what brought those with whom we vehemently disagree to their position. Are these just “bad people” or is something more going on?

The recent cross-country road trip that my wife and I undertook brought us from Oregon to Ohio by way of Idaho, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee and Kentucky. In unintentionally took us right through some of the most serious COVID hotspots in our country. Surprisingly, you wouldn’t have known that just by observation. Every hotel we stayed in required masks but no one, not even staff, wore them. And yet, this seeming obliviousness to the pandemic, particularly when we got down south, was coupled with incredible hospitality. What are we to make of this?

Author and theologian Brian Powers notes:

By overly esteeming the individual’s moral autonomy in the world, we’ve become blind to our own capacity for sin and violence. We’ve lost our appreciation for what Paul calls the spiritual forces of evil—and its tenacity at corrupting even the noblest of human intentions. As a consequence, we’ve lost in our politics a sense of humility. Convinced of our own goodness, we no longer enter the public square with a posture of grace toward our neighbors.

In short, we’ve lost a sense of the meaning of “original sin” having corrupted it into simply individual moral actions rather than recognizing it as a way of describing what the world does to us.

I remember when I first entered seminary I was talking with a new classmate and noted that I believed that all people are basically good. She smiled and replied, “Oh, you’re one of those – how quaint.” I still believe people are created to be fundamentally good but also acknowledge that Sin – capital “s” as Rollin Conway noted a few weeks ago – exists. 20th century theologian Karl Barth once wrote:

We revert from grace to the law ... because the law helps us avoid acknowledging that we live in a world held hostage by the principalities and powers. A world where we need God to intervene frightens us. It’s more reassuring to believe we require rules than rescue.

Our passage this morning calls us to battle but not in the ways we might expect. This is not “Onward Christian Soldiers, marching as to war.” This is a recognition that to engage the forces around and work for change requires armor only God can provide.

Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 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. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

These are primarily defensive weapons – armament that allows us to stand firm and that grants us the ability to continue to proclaim the gospel. This is not weaponry to destroy but to build up the community. It is important to note that the “you/yours” referred to in this passage is plural, that is “y’all” as in the community, the church. This is not a call for lone rangers but for communal response. And it is also a call not to duke it out with our neighbors but to pay attention to the larger forces at work around us that bring us into battle with one another in the first place.

Finally, it is an exhortation to prayer: “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.” In a recent Stillspeaking devotional, Rachel Hackenberg similarly calls us to the pursuit and practice of peace:

Peace as escape from trouble.
 Peace as a constant chorus of praise.
 Peace as the freedom from shame.
 Peace as relief from jealous cravings.
 Peace as satisfaction with the good.

The pursuit of peace requires the practice of peace.

As we continue to wrestle with enormous differences of opinion and deep divisions about the direction of our country may we be passionate about what the gospel calls us to proclaim while at the same time acknowledging the Sin that we may see so readily holding others in its grip also has a grip on us. Let us not be so righteous in our pursuits that only succeed in further deepening

the woundedness of others as well as ourselves. May our standing firm, with the strength and conviction God provides always serve to move us and others towards peace and reconciliation.

AMEN