

My dog Brady is a little terrier that we rescued from the Berkeley animal shelter nine years ago. I'll never forget looking back after playing with him in his pen, how he jumped up over the cement barrier to catch another glimpse of us as we walked away from that first visit. We adopted him a couple of days later after he had some required shots and surgery. Brady is very observant. He knows what his immediate future holds by the shoes that I put on. If I don't put on any shoes, he follows me and finds a comfortable spot nearby to curl up and rest. If I put on my hiking shoes, he goes crazy with excitement, twisting around, tail wagging, circling around me and even licking my face as I tie them up. If I put on my fancy shoes, usually those with heels, he stays put. He knows the heels mean I'm leaving for a good long while, and that he is not included. Brady can tell clearly by my shoes what's in store for him. He's alert and perceptive. The Ephesians passage today calls us to this acute awareness of our surroundings and to be prepared and ready.

When I go to buy a pair of shoes, still to this day, I make sure before I buy them that I can run as if a fire were lit under me. I started this back when my boys were little, and the habit has stuck. I learned the hard way that certain types of fashionable high heels and little boys do not mix. My boys were always danger magnets. If there was a sharp knife, a high cliff, or the deep end, that's where my little boys would be. I had to race to get there and so I had to ensure that I always had the proper gear. I'm sure it looks odd to see me in the shoe department, in a pair of heels, racing away from the open shoebox and tearing through the store. But for now, I want to always be able to run at a moment's notice. I'm guessing this need for certain footwear will change someday; however, until I get the message otherwise, I'm standing my ground.

The Ephesians passage today concludes our 6-week series. We have heard in this 1st century letter to the early churches of Asia Minor of the vision for the Church as an inclusive and unified community standing as Christ's body in the world. The final passage of Ephesians describes how this body is to be protected and reinforced for its purpose. Just as I have identified specific shoes for my optimal functionality, so the passage explains how the body of Christ is to be best equipped. The writer of Ephesians (Paul, or a follower of Paul) uses the metaphor of a suit of armor to illustrate this outfitting. The recipients of the letter would have been familiar with the image of a Roman soldier ready for battle, which was the epitome of strength and power at the time. Can you picture the Roman soldier uniform? Belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, sword?

Frederick Buechner gives an interpretation of what this physical suit of armor represents in a war of flesh and blood, a war of conquest, not for actual military fighting, but for the day-to-day battles we fight in a dog eat dog world where we are only out for ourselves, or our insulated families, or our country, or our race, which, he says, is all really a big banner of MYSELF. The armor in this type of war of self against other has the belt of self-wisdom where God only helps those who help

themselves; the breastplate of self-confidence because you must only have faith in yourself or you will never advance; the shoes of success, where you can acquire anything in the world if you want it badly enough and are willing to fight for it at any cost; the shield of worldly security that represents a defense against peril – money in the bank, a college degree, a basic skill that you can always fall back on; the helmet of attractiveness to meet worldly standards of appearances, and the sword of wit, an intelligence that can attack with sarcasm and cynicism. These are our go-to defenses to face the challenges of each day. They are our stand-by weapons of self-defense when it is “me” or “us,” against them, against other humans with which we are always in direct competition.

The enemy, though, the passage says, is not of a human nature that we, the Church, need to stand against, but evil forces, the craftiness of the devil. The writer doesn't give any more details as to what this evil force is other than non-flesh and blood rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers. We can gather from the last five chapters of Ephesians, which concentrates on unity, that the evil forces are those that cause divisions among us, that create barriers, that discriminate, that set people against each other. The real enemies, Ephesians points out, are not those human agents at which we can explicitly point a finger, but the cunning forces beyond our control that we cannot see; not the serpent itself but the power behind the serpent that sneakily and cleverly tempts Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It is those forces that give the appearance that everything is just fine when it is not. The people who lived in Germany during the Nazi era thought that Hitler was doing great things for Germany and Germany's economy; they didn't know the reality of the horrors being done at the time until much later. It is the force behind this regime of which our passage speaks. Not the person, not the organization, but the powerful force behind the system.

For those of us living in the virtual paradise that is Marin, we, too, may think that all is well in our county. We spoke last week about Marin being ranked the #1 healthiest county in California. One of the criteria for the health ranking was that Marin had the highest high school graduation rate. Marin is known as one of the wealthiest and best-educated counties, and yet among us, just a couple miles down the road, there is an achievement gap of which many are not aware. We must not be deceived by the statistics. Though the graduation rates vary from year to year, generally 92-98% of white students graduate from Tam High, while blacks, who represent 4% of the student body, graduate at a rate somewhere between 50-80%. At Tam High last year, 90% of the white students tested proficient in science while only 21% of the African American students tested proficient. This is not an African American problem. This is a problem for all of us.

There are programs such as Bridge the Gap and Hannah Project that help to close this achievement gap by providing tutoring and after-school support to the disadvantaged children in Marin City. There is a group of clergy that has formed through the Marin Interfaith Council to help address the achievement gap and work towards identifying and implementing viable solutions. Though it is a complicated

matter without an easy or clear-cut fix, we must be persistent in helping the underserved population in our county.

It is our mission as Christians to shed light on the injustices in our midst. This is our spiritual battle. We are not meant to fight one another, we are meant to come together and fight for justice, to fight the powers and principalities that divide our world.

The Ephesians reading gives us guidance as to how to do this – we are to do it with the armor of God. Buechner describes this as the war of liberation, where we are meant to liberate ourselves from selfhood, so that we truly care for others the way God would have it, where we become our highest selves beyond worldly ideas of power, success and security that are merely temporary substitutes for all-out victory.

The armor of God, the true power with which we are to clothe ourselves, has the potential to transform ourselves and the world. It is summed up today in this reading and in what we have been hearing about for the past five weeks in the Ephesians letter.

The paradox and brilliance of the military image of a physical suit of armor is that it gives power and strength to spiritual qualities that may not seem by worldly standards to be powerful. The spiritual qualities lifted up have a sense of vulnerability, yet the author is insisting that these qualities are our strength, the ultimate saving powers. We think it is force and might that will protect and save us, but the passage tells us otherwise. Forgiveness is power. Peace is power. Unity is power. Truth is power. The world tells us that we must fight and oppress and control and compete and stealthily scheme to win. Ephesians is saying that the victory is in the vulnerability. The victory is in the surrender to God. We think we must fight with worldly power, Ephesians says fight with spiritual power. We are not fighting flesh and blood, we are fighting spiritual battles, so we must use spiritual powers to conquer. They are what give us, the Church, true power to defend and stand up against and conquer the evil forces in our midst. One commentator notes, “Humility, gentleness, and patience look pretty feeble in a post-9/11 world until we recognize that these were the same armaments worn by our Risen Lord.”

When we wear the belt of truth, we open our eyes and hearts to the true reality around us, speaking the truth in love and speaking out against systems of denial, hatred, oppression and violence.

We wear the breastplate of righteousness – this protects our chest and heart, our very breath and center of our being and who we are – it is right living and holiness, where we seek to do God’s will by thinking and acting in loving-kindness for all.

We wear the shoes of peace – We are to be bearers of the good news, building up in unity, forgiveness and reconciliation.

We hold up the shield of faith – This is putting our trust in God above all else, our protection when we are ready to give up, when we are tempted to admit defeat, when we feel hopeless and helpless, under attack, this shield of faith covers us.

We wear the helmet of salvation – Through our faith we are saved by grace, and this helmet allows us to be continually renewed and restored, for though we mess up and fall short, we are forgiven.

We carry the sword of the Spirit – this is the word of God. We are to have Scripture on our tongue and in our heart, not to hurl it or wield it, but to offer it in hope of building up community.

Lastly, suited up as such, we are to be prayer warriors. We are to pray at all times, in all situations, that we may boldly proclaim the good news even in the midst of persecution and hardship. Knowing that we are protected and covered, we need not focus all of our energy on defending ourselves. We don't have to fear because we are not relying on our self, but on God. We are thus well equipped to pray for others and to be of service to others. This is the very suit of armor that was worn by our Lord Jesus Christ, who with this true power conquered all divisions and power of divisions, and who is still at work in the world today, creating a new humanity.

We are given this suit of armor at our baptism. It is ours, we are given it by grace, and don't need to do anything but claim it. As the church, can we today claim the armor of God, the true power in this world, as our own? Can we claim it also, as individuals, so that when we put our shoes on, whichever pair they may be, they will be recognized as those that bring peace? Let us stand firmly together, suited up in humility and confidence, ready to face whatever comes our way, knowing we are covered and protected, and powerful in our stance.