

*Witness Protection Program*

Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20

Whitefish UMC

August 23, 2009

- † Growing up in Chicago, one of my favorite city places is the marvelous Art Institute on Michigan Avenue. I have wonderful memories of my mother and grandmother taking me there to look at paintings (admittedly a little boring for a child).
- † But the best part of the day was eating lunch in the courtyard garden restaurant in the summer. A special place, it was reserved for birthdays or other celebrations. My mother used that restaurant experience, complete with a visit to nearby Buckingham Fountain, as an incentive to get me to look at the paintings.
- † Fast forward a few years to when our own son was little and we visited grandma. My mother wanted to show Carey, then five, the treasures of the Art Institute, too. I will never forget that first visit to the great museum with Carey.
- † I had forgotten that the first exhibit you see as you enter and walk to the special exhibit area or the Garden Restaurant is the Armor Exhibit. As a little girl, I remember being a bit scared of the huge suits of armor—it seemed they were inhabited by ghosts of knights past.
- † But our little boy was absolutely awe-struck by the massive displays of medieval armor, swords, jousting sticks, and other nasty weaponry. We couldn't get him to leave to go to see the paintings or to eat at the restaurant! Following that visit, he became fascinated with knights

- and castles and swords, and miniature battles took place on our dining room floor.
- † Of course many of us are intrigued by the accoutrements of battle. At the Art Institute, the maces, spears, breastplates, helmets, and such are beautifully displayed, and the craftsmanship of the metal and leather is remarkable. It doesn't take long to recognize that incorporated into the crests and filigrees of family or town are religious symbols as well.
  - † In fact, right next to the armor exhibit is one of medieval ecclesiastical or church officials' clothing and treasure. The two were as intricately interwoven as the fine tracery on the armor. If you do a little research, you'll learn that a man who put on all that armor couldn't move much.
  - † In fact for jousting, he had to be hoisted on to his horse, who itself was wearing armor. Neither horse nor rider was very capable of fighting with all that weight bearing down on them. And have you ever noticed that for every weapon in the panoply of agents of destruction there is a corresponding defensive article?
  - † Shields for swords, breastplate for daggers, helmet for mace—that ought to make for a standstill, right? Not really. Matt Fitzgerald writes: "But we know the truth: our armor always loses because our weapons are consistently one step ahead of our protection.
  - † Commenting on this 'improvement,' poet Richard Eberhart wrote of humanity, '...he can kill/As Cain could, but with multitudinous will,/No farther advanced than in his ancient furies.'
  - † That sorry truth turns the museum's display into an exhibition of human vanity. 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.”

- † Wow. But that doesn't seem to stop humanity from its fascination with weaponry of all kinds—whether of knights and knaves of old, contemporary war machinery, or the weapons of emotional, mental, and physical destruction that we all try on from time to time.
- † When Paul wrote these words about clothing oneself with the whole armor of God, Christianity was a small movement, coexisting uneasily with a diverse array of religions and beliefs. As we've said earlier, Ephesus, in what is now Turkey, was a cosmopolitan city where the precepts of Christians about peace, nonviolence, and the kingdom of God would have been countercultural indeed.
- † The citizens of Ephesus were used to seeing Roman legionnaires patrolling the streets, no doubt clothed in the kind of armor associated with the Pax Romana, the keeping of a peace by military rule and oppression.
- † So Paul's admonition about a different kind of armor, the armor of God, is an ironic metaphor. Christians are not meant to put on the armor of oppression and military might, but an alternate arsenal.
- † What does that armor include? Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, the word of God. The trouble is that over the centuries, as Christianity became associated with the Roman empire after the death of Constantine in the fourth century, Paul's words were taken literally, not as irony.
- † Thus we have the sorry history of religious wars, the Crusades, and wars between Protestants and Catholics, conquests of indigenous people around the world in the name of Christ.

- † John Buchanan writes: “Christian pacifists look at scripture, the words and life of Jesus, and our sad history and conclude that Christianity is essentially pacifist and that followers of Jesus cannot engage in violence of any kind. Down through the centuries they have made a brave and important witness.
- † Others, defined as Christian realists, the late Reinhold Niebuhr for instance, believe that it is sometimes necessary to take up arms, to defend one’s self, family, and nation and values, and that there is no conflict between Christianity and a strong military capacity.
- † But Niebuhr and others add that the cross should not be on the shield and that Christians who find themselves in military conflict should not only have a weapon but a heart aching at the tragic ability of human beings to live God’s will for peace.”
- † Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a hero of the German resistance who lost his life after a plot to kill Hitler failed, followed the second path articulated by Niebuhr. Yet his writings come perhaps the closest to the teachings of Jesus on the broader question of how it is that we live life in common with one another on a daily basis.
- † And that’s what I want to talk about for the rest of this sermon—not about whether Christians ought to be pacifists in answer to military conflict—but about how we are meant to live everyday life clothed in the armor of God.
- † If you grew up in a Baptist tradition like my friend Dave McConnell, now a United Methodist pastor, you were taught that your Bible was THE sword, and you were meant to have it with you at all times and carry it so you could use it in the battle against those who represented evil powers.

- † But did Paul mean for us to use the Bible as a weapon? I don't think so. Look back at the beautiful Psalm 84 we read responsively. Think about those words: "from strength to strength" in verse 7.
- † "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! ...Happy are those whose strength is in you....As they go through the valley they make it a place of springs."
- † Strength for the psalmist is not defeating the enemy in battle, but in cultivating and nurturing life, transforming an arid, dry valley into lush, fruitful gardens. Can you hear the words of Paul's alternate arsenal? "Life, goodness, mercy, and peace."
- † The problem is that we try to clothe ourselves in metaphorical armor of our own construction in order to survive and thrive in the world. We forget about God's witness protection program and try to go it on our own.
- † I know, "witness protection program" conjures up images of spy movies and novels and sinister stories of suspicion and betrayal. But I am trying to use irony and metaphor, too, though not as skillfully as Paul.
- † Through all the troubles of our lives and our world, we tend to get defensive, right? We trust not God's righteousness, but our self-righteousness. We strike back when someone crosses us. We discredit them with gossip, dismissal, or indifference.
- † We wound others out of our own wounds. And we lose ourselves in the bargain. We construct all kinds of armor made from the distractions of the world—money, success, addictions of various kinds. We become clothed in cynicism and worse yet, hopelessness.

- † But let's go back to our earliest Christian roots for a moment. The first Christians used the Greek word *martyrion* to describe themselves. Yes, its root forms our modern word, martyr. A martyr in contemporary terms is someone who gives up their life for a cause. It also has a more derisive meaning, as when someone self-righteously sacrifices him or herself.
- † But for the early Christians, those to whom Paul was writing, the word *martyrion*, or martyr, meant "witness." Christians, then, were meant to witness with their lives to the "truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and word of God."
- † That witness, then, is their true protection from the cosmic and personal forces of evil and destruction in the world and their lives. And the same is true for us. We've just lost sight of it in the distractions and distortions of our time.
- † Why then, are we so busy waging war in our own lives when we are meant to be a part of God's witness protection program? I don't know about you, but I don't want to be an angry, sword-carrying warrior for God.
- † Instead I long to witness to the truth, peace, righteousness and faith of Jesus with a confident, faithful, steadfast trust that God will lead me to embody a reflection of grace and kingdom values.
- † Those values are forgiveness, healing, compassion, and justice. I don't like myself when I become a defensive, angry, cynical caricature of my best self, the self God calls me to be.
- † Paraphrasing Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, *Leaving Church*, "If Jesus meant for his followers to rule the world with anger and violence, then why did he teach them to wash feet?" The heart of

Christianity is the radical, counterintuitive suggestion that the most powerful force in the world is vulnerable, sacrificial love.

- † It is love that looks weak and helpless but which finally, as Paul promised, “still stands when all else has fallen.” God’s love, expressed most ironically in that symbol of vulnerability and weakness—the cross of Jesus Christ—is our protection from our worst selves and from the sometime chaos and disorder of our lives.
- † From that love, Paul wrote, nothing can separate us—not all the powers or principalities—not even our worst mistakes—the armor of defensiveness, self-righteousness, and cynicism.
- † So, will you participate in God’s witness protection program? I pray that we will, together. Amen.

Sources:

Matt Fitzgerald, “Living by the Word,” *Christian Century*, August 11, 2009.

John Buchanan, “From Strength to Strength,” <http://fourthchurch.org>