

“Put on the Whole Armor of God”

Spiritual warfare is not a typical Presbyterian topic. We’re more down to earth. We do what needs to be done. People are hungry? We get some food. People are thirsty? We get some water. See the need; meet the need; that’s us.

But Paul invites us to look deeper, to see beyond what’s right in front of us and view the big picture: *Ephesians 6:12–13 (NRSV) 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. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.*

Presbyterians see the need. We meet the need. And this week, Paul invites us to look deeper; to see the big picture and meet the big picture – why the need? That’s the part of the Christian life that is spiritual warfare.

The problem of evil is woven into the warp and woof of reality. We cannot finally solve that problem; God alone can do that, and God in Christ has done that. What we can do, what we are called to do is to be a sign of that victory, a sign of the reign of God in this world, so we conclude our journey through Ephesians with a call to arms. Pennside Presbyterian Church: The battle is joined. Get ready for action. Take up the whole armor of God.

— A Call to Arms

The church militant is a frightening force. It defines who’s in and who’s out; what’s right and what’s wrong. No questions; the church has every answer; and God help those on the wrong side of our lines.

That’s not our vision for what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ, but we’ve seen churches that do embrace that vision. We’ve asked them questions, doubted their answers, and found ourselves on the outside looking in. We’ve been on the wrong side of their line.

So we greet the topic of spiritual warfare with deserved discomfort and before we can construct a sermon on the topic; a word of deconstruction: spiritual warfare does not mean discerning a demon behind every misfortune nor does it justify demonizing people who ask questions and refuse to toe a party line. *Ephesians*

6:12 (NRSV) *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.* Yet despite Paul’s wisdom, we choose to struggle against “enemies of blood and flesh.” We get personal and make it personal. Or, we get so focused on the work of “spiritual forces of evil” that we forget about the work of the Holy Spirit of God. We do more demonology than theology.

That’s not our vision for what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ. That’s not the struggle to which Paul calls us to arms. These responses are filled with fear. The church is on the defensive; we’re reacting to circumstances and responding from a position of weakness.

That’s what spiritual warfare is not, so what is it? What does it mean to answer Paul’s call to arms?

First, know the enemy.

John Calvin wrote: Let us remember [that we *wrestle not with flesh and blood*] when the injurious treatment of others provokes us to revenge. Our natural disposition would lead us to direct all our exertions against the men themselves; but this foolish desire will be restrained by the consideration that the men who annoy us are nothing more than darts thrown by the hand of Satan.¹

We are called to “quench fiery darts... with the shield of faith.” We need one another to do that. Standing against evil requires us to stand with one another. Unity is not an option! Divide and conquer works! When we sacrifice the unity of the church, because “we’re right and they’re wrong,” we crucify our Lord all over again. He died that we may be one. He prayed for us in John 17:11 (NRSV) **Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.** Unity is not optional; it is essential. In a divided and divisive world, a church that sticks together despite the forces that threaten to tear it apart is a vital witness to the reign of God in this world.

¹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Ephesians* (electronic ed.). Calvin’s Commentaries (Eph 6:12). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Satan wins when the church divides. The Devil dances for joy when we separate ourselves one from another, because “we’re right and they’re wrong.” Know the enemy. Unity is not optional. It is essential.

Second, know yourself. Remember the classic line from the cartoon strip Pogo, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

Proverbs teaches us: *Proverbs 16:18 (NRSV) Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. Proverbs 29:23 (NRSV) A person’s pride will bring humiliation, but one who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor.*

Pride is what makes the Devil the Devil. Church tradition suggests that it was pride that caused Satan to become a fallen angel. Pride is that voice that whispers in our ears and persuades us that we are completely right, without error, and they are wrong. We’re better off without them. Pride is a deadly sin; deadly because it turns us away from God, away from faith, away from one another.

Standing against evil does not excuse demonizing those with whom we disagree. It does not justify any means in pursuit of our ends. The Westminster Catechism teaches us that “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” We do not glorify God when we bully. We do not glorify God when we hate. We do not glorify God when we look like, sound like, act like the evil we oppose.

Answer Paul’s call to arms. Know the enemy. Know yourself. Unity is not optional. It is essential.

Get Ready for Action

Unity is not optional. It’s not easy either. Birds of a feather flock together. Like attracts like; unlike all-too-quickly becomes dislike. That’s human nature; that’s natural.

We are called to be supernatural; we are called to be a “sign, foretaste, and instrument” of the something more God has in store.

When we begin to do that work, we quickly realize the conflict between the ways of the world and the way of Jesus Christ. We experience spiritual warfare.

Are we ready for that? Are we prepared to resist the principalities and powers that compel us to conform?

This is my chief concern for us as a congregation. We have our strengths – good stewardship, a committed group of leaders, and a willingness to step up. We have our strengths, but our involvement in Christian Education is a weakness.

We have a plan. The program is in place, and thanks to a tremendous gift of service, we have improved our facility for both children and adults. And if you have a new idea that we missed, we want to know.

Everything is ready. Will you come? Will you bring your children and the children in your neighborhood? Will you get ready for spiritual action this fall?

Recently, I read Bill O’Reilly’s bestseller about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. In it, he describes the dire straits Lee’s Army of Virginia was in prior to his surrender. They’d been under siege at Petersburg for months. Food was scarce, so was ammunition and boots. Lee ordered a desperate forced march to a rail yard where they could re-supply; but when they arrived, starving and desperate for food, barefoot and blistered, longing for new boots, they found that the supplies had been stolen. The rail cars were empty.

To their credit and the credit of General Lee, they had one more terrible march in them; they fought one last desperate battle before Lee surrendered at Appomattox.

What is true for armies is true for the church as well; we fight on our feet and on our stomachs. We need to be fed. We need to keep our spiritual armor in good repair.

Get ready for action. Unity isn’t optional. It isn’t easy either. This fall, let’s turn our weakness into a strength! Answer the call to arms. Get ready for action. Put on the whole armor of God. Amen.