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Weekend of Sunday, August 22, 2021
13th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 21/Proper 16/Year B
First Reading: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18
Second Reading: Ephesians 6:10-20
Gospel Reading: John 6:56-69
Sermon Title: *“Instructions for the Disciple – Part 4”*

Theme

Like a general giving a rousing speech to troops before battle, this letter closes by calling on Christians to be equipped for spiritual warfare against evil. The full armor of God includes truth, righteousness, peace, faith, the gift of salvation, and the word of God inspired by the Spirit.

Primary Text – Ephesians 6:10-20

¹⁰Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For 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. ¹³Therefore 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. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Gospel Text – John 6:56-69

[Jesus said,] ⁵⁶“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

⁶⁰When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” ⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

⁶⁶Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Sermon

You may recall that the Rev. Dr. Robert Duffett unknowingly inspired me to preach a short four-part sermon series on the Letter to the Ephesians that I entitled, "Instructions for Disciples."

In week 1, Dr. Duffett taught that we are to:

^{4:1}lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

He further taught that that didn't mean that we need to agree on everything and march in lock-step, but that we need to recognize that together we are:

^{4:4}one body and one Spirit, just as [we] were called to the one hope of [our] calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

In week 2, I taught that as Christians we are to be ^{5:1}imitators of God, as beloved children. I answered your unasked question, "How can we imitate God if God is unseen and unknowable?" by quoting Jesus Christ, who said,

John 14:9 ⁹Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

And I taught that to be an imitator of God revealed in Jesus Christ, we simply need to live in love, and that means to nurture every relationship from our spouses and children, to coworkers and neighbors. And more than that, it means to nurture relationships with others who are not like us, don't look like us, don't appear to share our same value systems, and even people we do not yet know. I taught that we need to come to relationships with the expectation of friendship instead of being paranoid that everyone intends to do us harm.

And last week, I taught about the author's admonition that as Christians we need to make godly decisions about our behavior. That means we can and should say no to the ungodly behaviors of the prevailing culture. As Christians, we are to be above that low bar. I am certain I offended many when I said that we have just as many idols in our culture as the Ephesians did two thousand years ago. Fact is, I intended

to offend because until we are confronted with our sinfulness, it is pretty easy to just go with the flow of what everyone else is doing.

Well, that is three weeks of what I think are pretty clear "*Instructions for the Disciple.*" Perhaps I should just say amen and sit down. But there should be one more question coming from you, and that question should be, "How are we supposed to do all that?" I'm so glad you asked!

This question reminds me of an interview I had for the last job I had in the public sector. I had had nine good years as a corporate trainee for Parker Hannifin. I was a shooting star; I had the Midas touch; I was a success at everything I did. I left Parker and went to work for Vickers, a competitor of Parker. In my first two assignments with Vickers, I was successful again and was asked to interview at another division. In the interview, the VP and the manufacturing manager told me about one poorly performing operation and asked me if I thought I could turn it around. Looking back now, I believe I was over-confident in my own successful track record. I was thinking about it, but didn't ask it: "How am I supposed to do all that?"

Now after I tell a story like that, several of you will come up to me afterward and ask, "Well, how did it turn out?" So here's what happened. After floundering for a couple of years, the company made a decision to get out of that business altogether, and I was let go, and less than a month later I was enrolled at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and ended up here this morning.

Back to the question you should be asking, "How are we supposed to do all that?" It's as if the author knew his readers would be asking because the passage we have as our sermon text today is replete with answers presented in the most illustrative way.

First, he wrote,

¹⁰Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

The wealthiest man I ever befriended told me once that he'd 'rather be lucky than smart.' I didn't understand that for the longest time, but as I thought back on my previous career, I wasn't the brightest employee in the company, but I don't mind

telling you that I was the hardest working and maybe I was lucky in that the hard work I did, panned out – most of the time. And then one day, hard work wasn't enough, my luck had run out. I had not achieved success as the company saw it.

The first and most fundamental thing the Christian needs to learn is that our lives of discipleship are not gauged in wins and losses, successes and failures like they are in the secular world. Our lives are gauged in faithfulness. Look through scripture – there are plenty of faithful losers – heroes like Samson and Joseph and Jeremiah. Things didn't work out that well for Jesus either. Many of the apostles died a martyr's death. But they were faithful, and we look up to them today as models of faithfulness amid the fray of life. I am certain that they are being rewarded in God's eternal home prepared for all the faithful, and that is worth more than all the accolades a person can earn at work.

The second thing the Christian needs to learn is that we are not in the fray alone. We need to have this verse tattooed to the palms of our hands so that when we finally recognize we can't do it on our own and we are about to slap ourselves in the forehead and say, "How am I supposed to do all that?" We see this verse coming instead: ¹⁰Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

In the rest of this passage, the author speaks the language of *spiritual warfare*. This is the belief that God allows the devil and his minions to be loose in the world and all the bad stuff that happens can be blamed on them. You may recall that I blew your minds a few years ago when I said I don't believe that the devil or his minions exist, but that scripture and Jesus Christ himself uses them as a convenient metaphor to explain how evil happens in the world. I may be wrong about that and you are welcome to your opinions. I just know from my own personal experience that I alone am responsible for my sinfulness. I don't need to blame anyone else.

That business out of the way, the metaphor the author uses for building up our spiritual lives against sinfulness is brilliant.

The author wrote that we should put on the "whole armor of God." Can you imagine how big and burdensome that must be? But I digress. The author's point is that if we know that on Monday we are going out into the world where we might have to do unethical activities with colleagues and coworkers who talk and act like they have no sense of right and wrong, then we better *suit up*, because it will be

difficult to live up to our Sunday standards. I speak from personal experience. What to do? I'm so glad you asked!

¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist,

Here the author reached back to Dr. Duffett's sermon, in which the author taught us to speak the truth in love. Examples of this are the dreaded diagnosis but with a plan of treatment. The intervention that leads to recovery. The calling out sinful behavior to bring about correction. Truth is good. Truth in love is even better.

^{14b}and put on the breastplate of righteousness.

To be "righteous" means to obey God's commandments and live a God-honoring life. Psalm 106:3 says, "How blessed are those who keep justice, who practice righteousness at all times!" Furthermore, the breastplate protects the heart, and metaphorically, the heart is what we hold most dear. That might be one's spouse, children, family, and friends. But it also might be one's career or hobby. The Christian's heart might well be crowded, but the love of God and the love of godly living should be there too. The breastplate of righteousness will protect whatever you hold dear in your heart.

¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.

Did you know it is every Christian's job to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ? It's true! It's not just my job, I'm just one person. I'll do my part. But look at how many of you there are. Think of what we can do together, and with all Christians on the Earth! But the author didn't actually write, "the Gospel of Jesus Christ," he wrote "the gospel of peace." The gospel of peace is the knowledge, and more than knowledge, the belief that Jesus Christ brings salvation. You may recall what the angels sang to the shepherds on the night Christ was born, "Peace of earth." And the knowledge, the belief, the understanding that we are saved already should bring us peace. It's me telling you that you are already saved, now go out there and live your life like you know it is true.

¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

For a Roman soldier, a shield was his primary form of protection. In this verse, the author encourages the Christian to "take the shield of faith." Our action is required. Faith is like a muscle, the more we use it the stronger it gets. And if we have strong faith, nothing can take us down. And faith in Christ will influence the way we live. We don't worry. We are not anxious. We are confident. We are at peace.

¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

The helmet protects our heads, and our heads are where most of us think from most of the time!!! Faith is given to us by God, but as I said a moment ago, it is like a muscle, the more we use it the stronger it gets. The world is full of temptations. In our heads, we entertain thoughts of how satisfying a temptation might be. Rarely does it turn out like that though. And we know this on several levels, but the level that this verse speaks to is our knowledge of scripture and more specifically, the laws, commandments, and ordinances of the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus Christ our Lord and the apostles in the New Testament. The author wrote that our knowledge of scripture is the sword of the Spirit. Jesus said he would send the Spirit to remind us of all he taught and to guide us going forward. When we make use of our scriptural knowledge and the guidance of the Spirit it is like having a helmet on our heads to protect us from ungodly thoughts and behaviors.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

After that brilliant metaphor of "the whole armor of God," the author added one more admonition. If we've done all this *suiting up* to do battle in a world full of temptation and evil, there is one more thing the Christian must do. We must pray. Pray at all times and for everything. Prayer, it is said, changes things. God's mind can be changed – there is plenty of scriptural evidence of that. But prayer also changes the one doing the praying. None of us have arrived at sainthood yet. We all have rough edges and warts. Pray for yourselves that while you are still breathing, you may become more like Christ with every breath. Lets pray about that now.

Prayer

Loving and patient Heavenly Father, you have sent and continue to send teachers and teachings to us daily, and you give us your Holy Spirit to discern truth from fiction, godliness from sinfulness. We pray that you not only continue your patient guidance, but work in our hearts and minds to will to do better. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen