

The Dis-Armor of God

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Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18
Ephesians 6:10-20

I.

“Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return.”

That’s how the writer Annie Dillard put it.

—Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.

Ushers issuing crash helmets in church? That will be the day! We wear seatbelts in cars and helmets on bike rides. Our police forces wear bulletproof vests. Even some canoes are made of Kevlar. But few of us see Christianity as being dangerous enough to warrant protection. Well, not until recently.

I heard from a friend attending a recent speech by the Reverend William Barber, who is a civil rights leader in North Carolina, they were checking for weapons at the door. Not too surprising, given the history of hate crimes against black folk in the months just past.

Let’s consider this carefully. We assume faith is safe, even boring... I once knew someone who read the Sunday Times in the balcony during sermon time. And yet standing up for something as people of faith can get you in trouble still. It seems that in some places just trying to say a good word is controversial, whatever your faith.

In this majority Christian nation, even Christianity, when it speaks out for justice still can be risky. Bible-study leaders beware: the world can be a dangerous place for those who love peace-- at least the kind of peace Christ came to proclaim!

II.

Sometime between 60 and 100 AD, the Apostle Paul or someone close to him wrote a letter that we call “Ephesians”, to provide guidance to Gentile converts about how to live in a world full of violence and greed.

In a world in which wealthy slave-owning men had absolute life and death power over their families, wives and slaves, the writer counsels a more mutual and caring way of relating, for this new community of women and men, youth and children, rich and poor, slaves and free. How are they to create a new way of living together amongst themselves without attracting attention—and persecution? The writer walks a difficult line in his letter to the Ephesians. And then, in his final words to them, he counsels them to do something that seems like the absolute opposite of their beliefs. He starts using military language with these pacifist followers of Jesus. “Put on the whole armor of God” he tells them.

So what is this? Put on the armor of God? The writer gets specific about just what kind of gear they are to wear! The “belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness”; “the helmet of righteousness” and the “sword of the Spirit,” and more.

For some of us these words are disturbing. That’s because in the centuries that followed that early Church time, this passage of scripture and others like it have been twisted to encourage and justify a holy war approach to faith. Rather than loving our enemies, we have often been encouraged to turn Christianity into a crusade. Our forerunners in faith were often taught to hate in the name of righteousness; to kill without compunction in the name of the God of Love.

That’s how these words have been manipulated; but that isn’t what they meant when they were written, nor now, if we read them with care.

We might find these words disturbing. Nothing like the way the Ephesians would have heard it! As new Christians, they had laid aside their weapons for good. In the earliest days of the church, at least in principle, the followers of Christ took literally the teaching to lay down their swords, and to turn the other cheek when they were struck.

When those words were written, Christians understood full well, that they were being called not to kill, but rather to risk great vulnerability, for the sake of their new found beliefs. Like Judaism, Christianity was an illegal religion, seen as subversive, a threat to the empire. And for these people, simply to gather, let alone to speak publicly about their beliefs—well, that took great courage. And the question for such people was: What resources do I have, vulnerable, exposed as I am? What spiritual protection or

security do I have, in order to find the courage to walk and live as a part of this movement?

So this kind of armor isn't military armor—in fact this isn't really armor at all! This is exactly the opposite of the kind of armor we think of. Where others may put on a bulletproof vest, the followers of Jesus are invited to put on the breastplate of . . . righteousness? Justice! Where others may carry Plexiglas shields and hide behind thick walls of privilege, the followers of Jesus are invited to go without a physical shield at all, and trust instead in the power of faith to stop the burning projectiles of evil and hate.

III.

This isn't armor at all, this is God's DIS-armor. These are the things we do to open ourselves up. Just look at the footgear the writer invites us to try on. No hobnail boots, not even fast running shoes for a good escape. "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." What kind of footgear is that?

It happened when I was visiting in India on a seminary campus during a big conference, where scholars were engaged in a discussion of the latest social issues. But the students became distracted one day. There was buzz on campus. It was not about the conference either. "A barefoot priest is coming here," the young men and woman who had been showing me around told me. My face must have betrayed my ignorance. "Oh he is a barefoot priest" the students clarified. "He wears no shoes, like the poorest of the poor. When he travels he goes on the third class cars on the train." As they spoke their voices made it clear—this one was the genuine article.

What kind of footwear do you and I need, to prepare ourselves to genuinely live a gospel of Peace? Whatever it is, boots or sneakers or plain old going barefoot, that readies us for the work of the gospel of Christ's peace.

We live in a time when many people assume that God and country are always on the same side. Others imagine a Christian Faith that is a purely private and spiritual thing, safe and secure from all alarms. Such faith is more likely to be sleep inducing than dangerous. Well faith is indeed about the Spirit, but this Spirit doesn't like to stay safely boxed away in houses of brick and marble. God still cares about the plight of the poor; Christianity is still about creating a new set of relationships among women and men, rich and poor, people of every nation and race.

Genuine Christianity, if we takes it seriously, is still worthy of crash-helmets. This journey we are on together involves moving awkwardly and inch by inch into to a new way of being human. In this new humanity there is no more dominance of male over

female. There is no more ownership and coercion, one powerful set of people over another. There is no more us and them. There is instead mutual respect and learning and love.

That is, believe it or not, what the New Testament, the message of Jesus, is clearly about! You'd never believe it if you only had TV preachers and fundamentalism to listen to. But all over the letters of Paul, all over the Gospels, all over the teaching of Jesus, there it is written: One table. And as we apply its teachings in our time, it remains clear: one table for all of humanity, the rich and the poor, the gay and the straight and the as yet unnamed. One table on beyond the racism of the past. Now none of that is easy; sometimes it threatens our own souls! Other times it makes people—sometimes random people—irrationally angry.

SO put on the whole dis-armor of God. Ready your souls for the struggle, with joy and with love.

Trying to live the love and justice that we learn from Jesus of Nazareth remains a dangerous experiment. This experiment also requires some major disarming of ourselves. We need to open ourselves to that pilgrimage; need to trust in the reality of God, and trust the power of the Love we proclaim; trust the power of justice, and the love of Jesus; and just go for it.

And here is the good news. God in fact provides custom-fitted footwear for each of us, you and me, to live and love our way into Christ's peace. Some of us may need black oxford shoes, others stiletto heels. Some may wear hiking boots, and others may prefer racing flats. And some of us may need to go bare foot, to remind ourselves that there is no distance between each of us, and the poorest of the poor—not in the presence of the Living God who made us all.

Oh, there are no bullet proof vests strong enough to protect those who speak out publicly against the evils of bigotry. Only the power of our faith, in death even as in life. And there aren't any magic crash-helmets strong enough to stop an angry world from taking down those who speak inconvenient truths. But there is love, love over our heads and beneath our feet, love, in the air we breathe and the hearts that beat within us.

God is real. And our faith is real. And the love we learn at the hand of Christ is the most real of all. Let us walk in the name of that love, feet shod in that love, heads bare for the light of that love, minds clear... in that love. Amen.