SHORING UP THE DEFENSE
Scripture: Ephesians 6:10-20

FOCUS: Paul encourages those who follow Christ to put on the full armor of Christ like living to be equipped to resist the powers of evil which will forever be challenging the faithful.

War. It seems there is or has been a war on just about anything you can think of. I remember growing up when there was a war on poverty. President Lyndon Johnson declared it in 1964 during his State of the Union Address in response to a staggering poverty rate. Paul Ryan has calculated that we have spent 15 billion dollars so far on this war. And while the rate has declined from 19% to 15%, poverty has certainly not been defeated. And these days it often seems that there are more people waging war on those suffering under the weight of poverty than on the blight itself.

In 1971 it was Richard Nixon who declared a war on drugs in response to the growing problem of addiction and crime associated with drug trafficking. It is impossible to get a hard number when it comes to this so called war, but most estimates agree that it tops a trillion dollars spent over the past 45 years. And we need not look any further than the local paper or evening news to know this war is nowhere near over.

Lyndon Johnson was apparently fond of starting wars on social issues, not necessarily a bad idea. In 1965 He declared war on crime. It was a rather nebulous declaration, but you see the trend here. When we as a people identify a societal evil we want to go to war, we want to eliminate the threat.

And of course we all know that we are in the midst of a war on terror. But who among us really knows what exactly that means? Indeed it shifts from day to day as terror spreads around the globe and wears many faces. Of course there is ISIS and the Taliban is still around. Then there are the so called lone wolf attacks in places all around the world. Back in 2011 in a Time magazine article a group of scholars estimated that at that point the financial cost of the war on terror had exceeded 5 trillion dollars, thousands of American lives have been lost, and the tab is still open.

Sadly, it seems pretty clear that declaring wars on the ills which plague our world costs lots of money, often many lives, and never fully resolves the problems they were initiated to eliminate. There is a reason for that, and our scripture from Ephesians, and by the way this is the last week you will be bombarded by the hard words of this letter from prison, our scripture pegs the problem and offers words of encouragement for all who seek to defeat evil. As he begins his closing remarks to the struggling church in Ephesus Paul writes, ***“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”***  A better translation of that last phrase would be ***“so that you may be able to resist the wiles of the devil.”***

So Paul is telling us that it is time to get all geared up and equipped to wage war. Or is he? Some of you may be aware that I am casually interested in a particular football team from up north in our fair state. As I have followed the events of preseason I have been especially interested in things related to the defense. It seems to me that was where the weakness was last year. So I have been glad to see various reports that Bama’s front seven on defense may be the best in the nation. Hopefully there has been progress in the secondary as well. A good defense is fundamentally important when it comes to football. A marginal offense can win with only a single score if the defense can keep the opposing team out of the end zone. At the end of the game the other team may still be around, but if the defense does their job the team will have accomplished its objective.

As I pondered this passage over the past week I came to realize that Paul’s words were meant not so much as a call to declare war as were they a plea for the folks in the Ephesian church to equip themselves in order to be protected from the inevitable offensive onslaught of the forces of evil, which are ever present in the world. I think Paul was encouraging the people to shore up their defense in order to be prepared. Paul knew that a good defense is often more effective than a stellar offense. He also recognized the hard truth that until the end of time there will be dark forces loose in our world, forces that are a bit hard to fully define, but that are clearly at work in our midst.

It is increasingly popular these days to issue clarion calls to take up arms and to march into spiritual warfare. While it is certainly true that we must be engaged, alert and savvy when it comes to facing the dark realities of life, I am growing more and more disturbed by the fact that far too often the church sees itself as an offensive force charged with taking out the enemy. And most disturbing of all they often portray as enemies fellow Christians with whom they disagree. While taking out the enemy might seem to be a noble goal, the truth is that our real enemies will never be fully defeated in this life. Paul understood. You see he didn’t say anything about defeating anyone. And neither did Jesus. Neither Paul nor Jesus spoke about taking out the political opposition. Remember what Paul said? ***“Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to resist the wiles of the devil.”***

Paul didn’t mince words. He clearly identified the purpose of the armor, it was nearly all defensive. And it wasn’t to fend off the perceived bad guys, it was to defend against the devil, against the powers of evil. He made that abundantly clear with these words, ***“Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”*** Not against enemies of blood and flesh. Against spiritual forces of evil. We are called by the apostle to take up the gear needed to take defensive action against forces that are beyond our control. You see there is a huge difference between struggling against big picture forces of evil and attacking those mortals we see as the bad guys.

To be sure there are bad guys out there, there will always be bad guys out there and it is fair to say that they are operating under the influence of those spiritual forces of evil. But even the worst of the bad guys are creatures of the one true God and are as much loved by God as are the best of us. Their actions are not loved, but they are God’s children, they are free to accept grace and to be welcomed into the kingdom if they will accept the grace.

Paul challenges the Ephesians and he challenges us to focus more on defending against the cosmic powers of evil and less on waging war on those we perceive to be under the influence of the evil powers. As we take a look at the tools the apostle commends to us, note that only one could be considered at all offensive. So let’s consider the tools we have available and think together about how we can best use them to build up the kingdom of God.

We are first instructed to fasten the belt of truth. What a great place to begin. So often today we encounter dishonesty and half-truth. And if we are to be candid we all are guilty of being less than completely honest. But I think there is a subtle difference between truth and honesty, especially unbridled honesty. Take the overused example of someone who is obviously giddy about their new dress or sport coat who asked ***“What do you think of my new outfit, I saw it in the window and just couldn’t resist it, it is so lovely.”*** Most of us have found ourselves in similar situations. We all have different senses of style. We have different opinions on fashion and just about everything else. But what good does it do to take the attitude that you must be honest, even brutally honest in every case. What would be gained by replying, ***“That is the most hideous dress I have ever seen, you really got ripped off.”*** And what harm is there in simply finding some appropriate comment that avoids crushing an ego? There is no need go overboard, but there are certainly options which are more kind. You could say, ***“I’m so happy you found something that pleases you so much.”***

The honest reality may be that in your opinion the outfit is horrible. But that is an objective opinion. When Paul tells us that we are to be equipped with truth he is not speaking about words or opinions, he is encouraging an informed lifestyle, one reflective of the true nature of God as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Do you remember those piercing words from Pilate as he confronted Jesus? He was frustrated. He knew that the charges brought against Jesus were bogus. So he asked if he was a king as charged. Jesus replied that his kingdom was not of this world, and then went on to say that those who belong to the truth listen to his voice. And Pilate replies, ***“What is Truth?”***

The answer, the kind of truth Paul speaks of in this letter, is implied in Jesus’ words to Pilate and are spoken even more plainly by him when he declared, ***“I am the way, the truth and the life.”*** The kind of truth after which we ought to long is not a collection of facts, not a list of opinions, not a set of rules and regulations, not even a particular creed. It is a life-style reflective of the life of Christ. It is a life which seeks to emulate a God whose nature is unambiguous love. The first thing we must take up as we begin the journey toward faithfulness is that belt of godly truth, worn proudly for all to see.

Next we are instructed to put on the breastplate of righteousness. Righteousness and truth are closely related. Righteous living is living in such a way that it is obvious from all you do and all you say that you have adopted the truth as your benchmark for this journey of life which leads ultimately into the kingdom of God. I like one of the definitions I found for righteous which came from the dictionary of slang. In street slang to be righteous is to be genuine. So we find we are to put on the truth and then to live righteous, genuine lives guided only by that truth.

Next are the shoes we are to wear. Here Paul dispels any notion we might have that we are being called into an offensive campaign against our perceived enemies. Our shoes, those things that protect us as we move from place to place, our shoes are to be peaceful shoes. That is not to say that there will be no hardships, no conflicts if we wear the right footwear. Time and time again scripture reminds us that we can have peace even in the midst of conflict and turmoil. Notice that peace is the third piece of armor mentioned. The peace of which Paul speaks is that peace which comes not from absence of difficulty but from righteous living guided by God’s truth. The three work together for those who seek to defend themselves and others from the wiles of the evil one.

Maintaining such a challenging and rewarding lifestyle is no easy task, indeed it is a task none can do alone. So Paul charges us to take up an indispensable piece of spiritual armor which will aid us in our mission. We are to take up the shield of faith. He tells us that we will be able to quench the flaming arrows thrown at us by the evil one with that shield of faith. What I hear Paul saying is that it is our faith which will sustain us as we face the inevitable challenges of this life.

Finally we are offered the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word. Our helmet is hope for the future. Our assurance of eternal salvation encourages us as we wear with honor this amazing gift of grace which offers each of us eternal peace and joy.

Then finally we come to the only rather offensive piece in our set of armor. We are given the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. We hear that term, ***“word of God”***, and think of the Bible, for that is what we often call it. Indeed, each Sunday I lift the Bible as I finish reading and declare it to be the word of God for the people of God. But that is not all that the term encompasses. Indeed here the meaning is quite different. Paul commends to us the sword of the Spirit and declares it to be the word of God. In Greek when you spoke of the word, you were speaking of the very essence of something. It is the Holy Spirit which reflects the very essence of God and which offers us the boldness we need if we are to be those who spend our lives standing against the wiles of the forces of evil while so living that others are brought into God’s kingdom. We take up the sword, not to strike down others, rather we take up the sword of the Spirit to boldly proclaim God’s rule of love and grace.

 Some words from Saint Ignatius spoke to me this week of this whole matter of putting on the armor. To me they exemplify the call to live lives equipped with all the armor, not so that we might rush into battle looking for blood, but so that we might resist the wiles of the forces of evil as we seek to share the grace of the one who shed his blood for us all even with those we are tempted to engage in mortal combat. Ignatius wrote, ***“What we want above all is the ability to respond freely to God, and all other loves for people, places, and things are held in proper perspective by the light and strength of God’s grace. …In coming to a decision, only one thing is really important—to seek and to find how God is calling me at this time of my life. …God has created me out of love, and my salvation is found in my living out a return of that love. All my choices, then, must be consistent with this given direction in my life.”***

We are called to go to war, rather, we are called to shore up our defenses and live that life marked by consistent sharing of God’s abundant love and grace. Thankfully we are offered the equipment we need to so live, truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the Spirit. For your sake, for the sake of a world in need of redemption and for the sake of the kingdom of God may we put on the whole armor day by day. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.