

In the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of his letter to the Christians in Ephesus, Paul encouraged them to take upon themselves “the whole armor of God.” It was battle time: not flesh and blood battle, but spiritual battle against very real forces of darkness and evil. The armor Paul talked about involves our human choices as we proceed in life, choices perhaps made clear in the lesson from Luke, where Jesus warned his followers not to love only those who were good to them, but to actually live lovingly toward their enemies.

Times were tough back then. Jesus did not say, “*IF* you have an enemy.” He said that those who followed him were to love their enemies. To be kind only to those who treat you well is simply a business arrangement: you be nice to me, and I’ll be nice to you. To offer someone who has treated you badly kindness is something else entirely. According to Jesus, this is the way to true life and the only way to be fully obedient to God.. As Paul told all who would read him, “Put on the armor of God.”.

We know about armor. Armored cars, helmets and kevlar vests for our soldiers... And we know how to armor ourselves against mosquitoes and too much sun. And there are lots of ways we try to “arm” ourselves to get through life! A good education and skills, good manners, proper grammar, “street smarts,” to name few.... If we want to get ahead, we have to arm ourselves with an edge of some sort, and perhaps even with ruthless disregard as to those we have to beat out in order to make it to the top... To “make it” in this world, we need the armor of perseverance, of ambition, of impressive presentation... We try to protect ourselves from the criticism of others; we hide our feelings; we try not to look vulnerable.... We try to look like we know what we’re doing and where we are going... We spend a lot of energy on our “armor.”

The apostle Paul was talking about a totally different kind of armor, and a totally different kind of war, a spiritual war, a battle over who we really are and to Whom we really belong.

In her book, *God in Pain*, Professor and former Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor tells about what happened at the celebration of her nephew’s first birthday. In her words: “I still remember my nephew Will’s first birthday party. He was as round and bald as a Buddha at that point, still hovering on the verge of speech. Never out of his parents’ sight, he was a typical only child – used to being the center of attention – only he was not spoiled yet, because he had not yet learned to manipulate love for his own ends. He just thought everyone was loved the way he was, and he gave it away as fast as he got it.

“There were only a handful of us there that day...parents, aunts, grandparents, plus his godparents and their seven-year-old son, Jason. After the cake and the singing and the presents were all over, Will let us know how pleased he was by doing his new dance for us - a shy twirling in place that he had invented a few days before. We were all circled around him adoring his dance when Jason simply could not stand it anymore. He charged through the circle, put both of his hands on Will’s chest, and shoved. Will fell hard. His rear end hit first, then his head, with a crack. He looked utterly surprised at first. No one had ever hurt him before, and he

did not know what to make of it. Then he opened up his mouth and howled, but not for long. His mother hugged him and helped him to his feet and the first thing Will did was to totter over to Jason. He knew Jason was at the bottom of this thing, only since no one had ever been mean to him before he did not know what the thing was. So he did what he had always done. He put his arms around Jason and lay his head against that mean little boy's body, and at that moment all my Christian conviction went right out the door.

*"I will buy him a BB gun for his next birthday, I thought. Iron knuckles. A karate video for toddlers. It just about killed me, to think how that sweet child would have to learn to defend himself.... Only according to Paul (FTE will say JESUS), Will was right and I was wrong.... What Will did to Jason put an end to the meanness in that room. What I wanted to do to Jason would only have multiplied it. As Paul said to the Romans (Romans 12)), 'Do not repay anyone evil for evil.'*

Speaking about this counsel of Paul, Rev. Taylor came to a powerful understanding: "Paul seemed to understand that the real enemy is not whoever pushes us down in the middle of our dance but whatever is inside of us that wants to leap up and push back. ...." (*God in Pain*, pp. 38-39, edited by fte)

"Put on the full armor of God," Paul challenges....

To "put on the armor of God" is to seek to align our lives with what really matters in life, and specifically, to align ourselves with what matters to *God*. That's why we're here: Our very presence in church today proclaims that God is God and that we are trying to open our lives to God's way. So what is our armor? Our armor is to live by God's ways, God's laws, the challenging teachings of Jesus, and to refuse to react violently to the violence of the world around us.

It is told that in the days of the Revolutionary War there lived at Ephrata, Pennsylvania, a Baptist pastor by the name of Peter Miller who enjoyed the friendship of General George Washington. There also lived in that town a man named Michael Wittman, who seemed determined to do all in his power to abuse and oppose his pastor. One day Michael Wittman was involved in treason and was arrested and sentenced to death. The old preacher started out on foot and walked the whole seventy miles to Philadelphia to plead for the man's life. He was admitted into General Washington's presence and at once begged for the life of the traitor. Washington said, "No, Peter, I cannot grant you the life of your friend." The preacher exclaimed, "He is not my friend – he is the bitterest enemy I have." Washington cried, "What? You've walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in a different light. I will grant the pardon." And he did. And Peter Miller took Michael Wittman from the very shadow of death back to his own home in Ephrata - no longer as an enemy, but as a friend. (*Illustrations Unlimited*, James Hewitt, pp. 345-346)

Not a natural thing for any of us to do, for to live "loving our enemies" and to refrain from always having to "get even" requires a real decision on our part to do what Jesus asked us to do,

not what we FEEL like doing or what even seems reasonable by the standards of our society. But there can be much power in choosing the way of love in this world, whether that power is evident or not.

Another story: A little boy was on his way to school one day when three older boys stopped him and began to bully him. They called him names, made fun of his clothes, and took his lunch and ate it right in front of him. Then they went away, laughing and proud of themselves. The child was really upset, but he didn't tell anyone. As he went hungry that day, he worried about how he would handle it if those boys took his lunch every day. That night, he told his parents what had happened. His father said, "You might do what Jesus suggested. Jesus said, 'If somebody hits you on the cheek, offer him the other one, too...'" The boy thought this sounded very strange, and he asked his dad what that meant. His dad whispered something in his ear, and the boy smiled. "That's what I'll do!"

The next day, on the way to school, the big boys stopped the younger boy again. They teased him and called him names. But when they started to take his lunch, the little boy said, 'Wait, I have something for each of you.' He smiled, reached into his book-bag, and took out three lunches. 'I brought each of you a lunch today, so you will all have plenty to eat.' The older boys were speechless. ...And the younger boy was never again bothered by those boys. (John E. Sumwalt, *Lectionary Stories*) (And No, the boy did NOT put some sort of fast-acting laxative in the sandwiches! But we who are well-acquainted with the ways of the world might be so tempted!)

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul spent time describing the 'armor of God' that we are to take upon ourselves.. In the 15<sup>th</sup> verse, he included an interesting perspective on footwear: "As shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." Have on your feet whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.... An intriguing statement. My mind read this and jumped to the fairly recent "gelling" commercials, where two people are about to get into an argument over a fender-bender or over which one gets a taxi, when gel inserts suddenly jump into one of the person's shoes and the "gelled" guy is transformed into an affable, "No problem is too big for me now" sort of peacemaker.... While I don't think Paul had anything like this in mind, I DO believe that he was counseling us to make sure that our feet are ready to walk in ways of peace, to go the second mile to offer peace and God's peace to others.

We live in a time of much uncertainty. Our economy may be slowly improving, but too many still don't have jobs. Everything is fragile and tentative. The drought throughout so much of our country will drive food prices higher. Health care expenses still offer a huge challenge. And we've all been disheartened by the partisan, power-grabbing "war" among our members of congress. Now we're in the middle of messy, ugly campaigns that waste huge amounts of money by throwing negative messages around until we're sick of it all.

In the midst of all this, we yearn for security. A safe place to live. Enough to eat and keep us warm and to provide for our families. Decent health care. We just want to have security. Many try to buy safety. People put alarms in homes and cameras on city streets, they fingerprint and

even install microchips in children. We can vaccinate and wear masks and do everything possible to try to stay healthy.... But finally, our only real hope is God. And our only effective armor will be that of living our lives according to the way God has asked us to live. “Love your enemies, forgive those who persecute you.” “Love your neighbor as much as you do yourself.”

It was the final week of the spring semester at Harvard, several years ago, right before exam week. Preacher Peter Gomes (who died last year) of the Harvard Chapel delivered a sermon of hope and challenge to the Harvard community. Gomes’ words in the middle of his sermon: “This, in case you haven’t recognized it, is a commercial for God. Put your confidence in something that works. It is God who will keep you when all else has failed you; and it is to God to whom you will turn when you have exhausted all the alternatives. It is God on whom you will call when you get that fateful diagnosis; it is God on whom you will call when the bottom drops out; it is God on whom you will call when you pass through those seasons of doubt and despair, when life itself seems not worth the living and you cannot remember the last victory; and it is God on whom you will call with your very last breath.” (*More Sundays at Harvard*, p. 167)

Here we are in Winsted, Connecticut, about to enter September, 2012. Much is on our minds and our calendars: health issues, job challenges, tight budgets, relationship problems, questions of where to live.... Whatever our specific situations and no matter how heavy our burdens, each of us is given a huge challenge: “Put on Christ....Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” May each of us and all of us together find ways to discover the power of our faith as we dare to trust and live out what our Lord has asked us to do. May we dare to let our feet and our attitudes, our hands and our prayers, follow the way of Jesus. By simple decisions, each day, we *can* put on the full armor of God. It is possible because our Lord is with us; we are not and never will be alone! Thanks be to God! Amen.