

Back to Sermons page...

**WISE AS A SERPENT, GENTLE AS A DOVE; EPHESIANS 6:10-20; AUGUST 26, 2018; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Our son, Douglas, is a Peace, War and Defense major at the University of North Carolina. Having served seven years in the Army including a tour in Afghanistan, he has more than passing interest in the "Just War" theory which we have often discussed.

The concept of Just War was first developed by St. Augustine as the Roman Empire fell and north Africa where Augustine lived was under siege; the concept became a moral principle in the theology of Thomas Aquinas a thousand years later; just war theory establishes the moral/ethical boundaries for the decision to go to war and the conduct of war. It is the basis for international agreements and accords and defines what qualifies as war crimes.

Despite the military imagery Paul uses, however, fighting a just war is *not* what he is talking about in his letter to the Ephesians. But since military weapons are biblical the metaphor today, I want to note this important issue that Christians have wrestled with for the entirety of church history; the question of how and when to use the force of arms. In my lifetime we have waged six wars and now wage our longest war.

The pacifist tradition espoused by the historic peace churches is highly respected because Quakers, Mennonites and Amish Christians who comprise most of our religious conscientious objectors practice what they preach; they live peaceful lives.

But the majority of Christian traditions including our own Reformed tradition subscribe to some form of just war theology because, the reasoning goes, human nature is flawed, tyrants exist and the ethical duty to prevent atrocities and protect innocent civilians is grounds to take up arms when such threats are made.

Yet, the decimation of war and its utter disregard for life often violate internationally agreed upon principles to contain fighting and prevent barbarism; the ethnic cleansing and genocide that have plagued Africa, or biological weapons used by dictators, such as, recently, Bashar Assad with Vladimir Putin's approval, invariably send us back to question whether any war can be justified.

And so Paul's reference to and use of military metaphors today catch our eye; such imagery possibly inspired the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers" that was much maligned during the Vietnam War because it used military metaphors at a time when our own nation was involved in what many thought was an unjust war.

What does Paul mean then when he says "put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand firm against the wiles of the devil."

"Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on what ever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God."

Back to Sermons page...

The commentaries note that Paul is talking to not just to individuals but to individuals who lead the church; the concern is holier than thou individuals feel justified condemning those whom they regard as heretics or apostates, and do much harm.

Rather, Paul is addressing the whole church, the body of Christ in its witness to the world; indeed, we have seen occasions when the whole church – as in the Lutheran Church in Nazi Germany or the Roman Catholic Church and the pope himself during WWII responding to the Nazi's, or the Reformed Church in northern Ireland under the spell of the Rev. Ian Paisley or Catholics supporting the terrorist acts of the IRA in northern Ireland have veered as far as it is possible to veer from what St. Paul is urging the church to do.

Religious hatred and wars exhibited in each of the seven great religious traditions is one of the great scandals of human history.

Yet, that is no reason to dismiss or gloss over Paul's message today, decked out, as it is, in military terminology. As I was preparing for the September 16 opening of Case Library and Spiritual Life with my annual presentation on my summer reading I discovered a helpful way to think about what Paul is getting at.

The late Irish poet and Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, a Roman Catholic from northern Ireland who was well acquainted with sectarian conflict for it shaped his life and work, talks about the "redress of poetry." The role of the poet in society, as Heaney describes it in his famous essay, is to my thinking, not unlike how Paul envisions the role of Christians and the church in society.

"Redress" means to set right, to rectify or to remedy by making compensation for a wrong or, as a noun, it means the compensation itself. Poetry as redress, says Heaney, does not mean poems that extoll political or cultural causes if those causes advance programs or policies that perpetuate inequality or suffering. Poetry as redress means to take up the side of the one wronged, to rebalance the scale.

To illustrate, Heaney quotes activist/mystic Simone Weil, "If we know in what way society is unbalanced," she writes, "we must do what we can to add weight to the lighter scale...we must have formed a conception of equilibrium and be ever ready to *change sides like justice*, 'that fugitive from the camp of conquerors.'"

"Obedience to the force of gravity," Weil continues in her landmark *Gravity and Grace* "is the greatest sin"; which I take to mean abandoning one's principles 'going along with the herd' such as: German citizens when the extermination of the Jewish population was taking place in their midst; or *as we do* continuing to pollute the atmosphere while we witness climate change decimate species of animals, birds and fish (now occurring with a super red tide in Florida) not to mention the threat to human life on this one year anniversary of Hurricane Harvey and the flooding of Houston.

Heaney says poets and mystics, (and we can add Christians and the church), like Weil, tilt the scales of reality toward some 'transcendent equilibrium' or, what Christians call the 'Kingdom of God.' We work for a counter reality, one that, at first, may only be imagined. Weil's exemplar for activism is Jesus who sides with the poor and outcast.

Back to Sermons page...

This is helpful because it defines the struggle of good and evil including military wars as ultimately war fought with spiritual weapons like faith, truth, righteousness and salvation, and we could add to Paul's list hope and love, to keep the scales of justice balanced; this is finally a battle fought in the human heart.

If we take one step back we see how effective these spiritual weapons are against the wiles of the devil. In 1989, when the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain came crashing down it was the spiritual strength of the free world and specifically of poets and church leaders in eastern Europe that caused a major rebalancing of society from totalitarian to democratic government.

One of those great leaders the poet/playwright and eventual Prime Minister of the Czech Republic Vaclav Havel wrote about the nature of hope as a spiritual weapon if you will, under Communism, "Hope is a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world of here and now, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. I don't think you can explain hope," Havel writes, "as a derivative of something here, of some movement, or of favorable signs in the world. Rather its deepest roots are in the transcendental, just as the roots of human responsibility are. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

When I think of spiritual weapons like that, I think of Martin Luther King, Jr. preaching his "I Have A Dream" sermon on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial as racists plotted his death. I think of the ending of apartheid in South Africa through largely peaceful, nonviolent means – a nation that unfortunately had to defend itself against a racist tweet by our president last week. Simone Weil as a Christian lived by her spiritual principles; she joined forces against fascism in the Spanish Civil War and advocated for workers' rights in France in the 1930s tipping the balance of justice.

I'll get to the armor of God in a moment, but consider the key idea in Simone Weil's thought – she says we have to be ready to change the sides we lobby or advocate for, like justice "that fugitive from the camp of the conquerors."

Simone Weil knew as a French citizen how easily revolutions can turn to into reigns of terror; the victims easily turn into oppressors when they become the conquerors. For every "evil" committed by the "alt-right" or the present administration, we can find one to match it on the other side of the aisle when liberals and progressives held power. Power can be like an hallucinogen – it alters our sense of right and wrong, inflates our sense of self worth and justifies imposing our own agenda without regard to tradition or law. Operating in life without Paul's spiritual weapons is the Achilles of a family or workplace or nation where feuds are perpetuated and politics polarized. Liberals may fume against the current White House but they dare not disregard their own potential to commit the very acts they abhor.

Back to Sermons page...

I am not saying Paul would have us withdraw from the political process, rather he would have us engage it like a dear friend of mine who was the Republican chairperson of Northampton County PA meant when he said, “we Republicans need good Democrats like you Tom who are willing to split their tickets in the voting booth.” Or we might say like John McCain who followed his conscience rather than party lines.

Paul is urging us to take the side of God to the extent that we put on ‘the whole armor of God’ to withstand the evil in our day. And the evil in our day, as Jesus makes plain to Judas, does from time to time temporarily reign in our world. Part of our problem is that we lack a concept of evil big enough to take our world, ourselves and God seriously enough.

We don’t even like the word evil. We have removed it from our speech along with the notion that we are sinners in need of God’s grace. And we have replaced it with much smaller, easy to manage concepts like dysfunction and character flaw that we think we can fix on our own.

We have succeeded in reducing nearly everything to sound bites on Facebook and images on Instagram –

but without a perception of reality big enough to describe the struggle of good and evil in our lives, without such a view of what it means to be human, we will fail to grasp the potential for good or evil we are capable of; much less deal with the forces of darkness at work in our institutions and society.

The spiritual weapons Paul urges us to put on: truth, righteousness, faith and salvation; plus the ones we’ve added hope and love, and others like empathy, honesty and courage are the only weapons with which we will become fully human and liberated persons.

The last time I preached on this text was September 16, 2001, five days after 9-11. That sermon was picked up and printed in the *Buffalo News*.

It appeared then that we were under siege by a stateless enemy whose aim was to wreak havoc upon western civilization. The perpetrators claimed to believe some version of Islam that gave them the right to pursue their evil ends. But just as polarizing as that moment was, it was also a unifying moment as President Bush called upon the nation to prepare for a long war to find and destroy the terrorist organization that attacked us, as well as an internal struggle of soul – not to allow fear to drive us against our Muslim neighbors, and thus become the very thing we abhorred.

I said then evil thrives on fear that dehumanizes the enemy and that we must be wary of the same venom that afflicts the terrorists entering our spiritual bloodstream. It would appear that the venom of fear has infected us and spread from fear of just Arab-Americans to fear of immigrants and the so-called ‘deep state,’ as well as fear of the Republican Party, Fox News, and the NRA depending which side you are on. We are living in society-wide spiritual war that will define us for generations. We could either lose or gain our souls. Today’s epistle couldn’t be more timely; the antidote to what afflicts us are spiritual virtues; Paul’s weapons of the heart. Let us put them on! Amen.