

2021 08 22 – Armour of God

Ephesians 6:10-20 (The Inclusive Bible)

I have to admit that I normally avoid this particular text. I'm not really comfortable with military images like swords, helmets, shields and breastplates. Especially, when those images are associated with God and Spirit. I struggle with the idea of God as warrior or any suggestion that the Holy Mystery encourages or supports fighting or war. But despite my reservations, I have specifically chosen these words from Paul's letter to the Ephesians for today's service.

As you know, I have just returned from sabbatical. While I was away from my ministry here in this congregation, I took the opportunity to do many different things: I watched hours & hours of on-line seminars and took an on-line course from Vancouver School of Theology; I went on a 5-day silent retreat in the foothills of the Rockies, I visited family in Alberta and Ontario; I journalled, I gardened, I hiked, I golfed, I went camping at Sask Landing (when it wasn't too hot); and I read a lot of books. In fact, I started my sabbatical by reading a book by Brené Brown called *Daring Greatly*.

In her book Dr. Brown devotes an entire chapter to the armour that most of us wear every single day. She writes that each morning many of us put on at least one of these three different shields: the first she calls foreboding joy, a shield that keeps us from feeling too much (too much joy, too much love) because we are afraid of the pain of loss; the second one called perfectionism – a shield that is formed by the belief that our personal worthiness is connected to achievement, to

doing things perfectly; and the third one called numbing, a shield of addictive behaviours like over work, over eating, drinking, and gambling so we can numb the difficult feelings that we don't think we have the strength or the courage to deal with. Foreboding joy, perfectionism and numbing these are three painful and destructive shields that many of us use every day of our lives. (*Daring Greatly*, pages 117-147)

Brené Brown goes on to talk about other shields that are used less frequently. For instance, she describes a shield that is regularly used in the military and other competitive occupations. With this shield people see the world as black or white, us or them, winner or loser, kill or be killed. This particular shield may work well in war, but it is not a healthy way for any of us to live. It's one of reasons that so many of our veterans struggle when they return home after service overseas. With this shield in place, we are unable to reach out and trust, to make meaningful connections with family and friends. Dr. Brown also mentions the shield of cruelty or cynicism that many of us use to hide our feelings of vulnerability. This is not an exhaustive list but it does give us some idea of the harmful armour that we wear in our day-to-day living. (*Daring Greatly*, pages 151-171)

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, is talking about a very different kind of armour. His armour is made up of a belt of truth, a breastplate of justice, footgear for peace, a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation (or healing) and a sword that is the Spirit of Love. Truth, justice, peace, faith, healing and love, these attributes do not create defensive armour, they are not meant to keep danger away, or to protect us from pain or suffering. These are tools of

connection and compassion. These are tools that allow us to see the worth in ourselves and in others. These are tools that allow us to have mutual relationships with our neighbours near and far. Wearing them means having only an armour of love between us and the other.

Brené Brown would call this the armour of wholeheartedness and vulnerability. Wearing this armour takes courage. It takes the courage to feel great joy knowing that the sword of love can also lead to painful separations. It takes the courage to fail, to mess up, to look like a fool, knowing that it is in making mistakes that we learn, knowing that we are God's beloved no matter what, knowing that our worthiness does not depend on our achievements. It takes the courage to feel not only happiness but sadness too. This armour, this way of living requires open hearts and trust in the Holy Mystery, the Essence of Love.

In her book Dr. Brown uses a simple illustration of what it means to wear the armour of God, the armour of Love. She writes,

On the way home, I stopped at Barnes & Noble to pick up a magazine. The woman ahead of me in line bought two books, applied for a new "reader card," and asked to get one book gift-wrapped without getting off of her cellphone. She plowed through the entire exchange without making eye contact or directly speaking to the young woman working at the counter. She never acknowledged the presence of the human being across from her.

After leaving Barnes & Noble, I went to a drive-through fast food restaurant to get a Diet Dr. Pepper. Right as I pulled up to the window, my cell phone rang. I wasn't quite sure, but I thought it might be [my son]

Charlie's school calling, so I answered it. It wasn't the school—it was someone calling to confirm an appointment. It got off the phone as quickly as I could.

In the short time it took me to say, "Yes, I'll be at my appointment," the woman in the window and I had finished our soda-for-money transaction. I apologized to her the second I got off of the phone. I said, "I'm so sorry. The phone rang right when I was pulling up and I thought it was my son's school."

I must have surprised her because she got huge tears in her eyes and said, "Thank you. Thank you so much. You have no idea how humiliating it is sometimes. They don't even see us." (*Daring Greatly*, page 148)

This example is not a particularly daring one, but it does illustrate the importance of letting down our defensive shields and connecting with our fellow human beings. If we ignore the people we interact with on a daily basis, how can we possibly expect to recognize the humanity in those who we will never meet, who live in other countries or other continents? It is too easy to put up a shields and dehumanize people who live in far off places, especially those whose cultures vary greatly from ours.

When we let the fear of vulnerability take over and allow our defensive shields to strengthen then our relationships begin to break down. This happens at every level of our lives with our families, our colleagues at work, our neighbours, and beyond. When these shields become a part of our political systems then the relationships that falter are the ones between states, provinces or even countries. And when this happens war can result. This week our news was filled with tragic

stories from Afghanistan. Stories that remind us of the importance of looking for other solutions before sending our young men and women into battle.

In his letter Paul wrote, “Our battle ultimately is not against human forces, but against the sovereignties and powers, the rulers of the world of darkness, and the evil spirits of the heavenly realms.” We could spend all day trying to decipher what exactly Paul meant, but I’d like to share Steve Garnaas-Holme’s interpretation. I believe it speaks an important truth:

When you fight the devil with the devil's weapons
you have joined his side.

Our struggle is not against violent people
but against violence.

Our struggle is not against people at all,
even the most evil ones,
but against the evil itself, that old ruler,
which clenches our hearts as well as theirs.

Our struggle is against systems and structures,
the powers that dehumanize people and diminish life,
the spiritual forces we've ingested,
the authorities we've knelt to.

We are rebelling against our own masters.

To vanquish the conquerors
we must vanquish our desire to conquer.

Before we are victorious we must become free.

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As Paul recommended, let us pray... May we all turn to the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being, the Love that is at the centre of all things and know that we are loved and worthy just as we are. May we free ourselves from the defensive armour that limits our relationships and our ability to feel the joy of living. May we all take on the armour of truth, justice, peace, faith, healing and love, the armour of God.

So be it. Amen.