

Putting on God

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Ephesians 6:10-20

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

¹⁹Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Years ago Little Golden Books published a children's book called, "I Can Dress Myself," which features a young Grover Muppet proud that he can button his shirt, zip his pants, and pull on his cowboy boots. The title reminds me that there was a time when none of us was able to dress ourselves. We weren't capable of the buttoning, the zipping, and the pulling required to get ourselves into our clothes. Someone had to do it for us. But I'm sure you'd quickly remind me, that that was a long time ago – longer for some than for others.

Eventually, we all learned to perform these tasks for ourselves, and short of two broken arms at the same time, most of us having been doing it ever since. Now we do it without thinking, without considering how difficult it once was to fumble a small, round button into a smaller, narrower buttonhole. And as long as we can

manage to dress ourselves without too much difficulty, we won't think about it. We won't stop to consider the considerable amount of independence which our ability to dress ourselves provides us, until the day comes when we can no longer do it.

Today's Epistle Lesson from Ephesians 6 uses dressing oneself as a metaphor for spiritual preparation. In a nutshell, we prepare ourselves to meet the other-than-physical challenges of life by putting on spiritual armor that God has made available to us. The author of Ephesians mentions various items that make up this armor – belt, breastplate, shield, shoes, helmet and sword. But there is nothing particularly spiritual about these articles of clothing. We could just as easily substitute Grover's long underwear, shirt, pants, boots and cowboy hat. The articles are merely physical items which the author uses to represent spiritual principles – in this case truth, goodness, courage, peace, faith, and salvation – ideals by which people can live.

I can't hold up and show you an ideal, and it's difficult to visually inspect a principle. That's why ideals and principles fall into the category of 'spiritual' things. The root of the Hebrew word for *spirit* means both breath and wind. We can't see the wind, but we see evidence of its movement. Likewise, ideals have no physical substance – like say, shoes have substance. We can see our shoes, feel them, smell them, hear them and even taste them, if we wanted to. They are physically real to us. Principles like truth and courage have no such substance. We can't see or hear them, but we can think of them and speak of them with others who have similar understanding of such non-physical things.

So, the author of Ephesians isn't talking about actual armor – belts and swords and such - and he isn't interested in whether we can physically dress ourselves. He's talking about character traits – behaviors that human beings can practice or not practice and so be said to demonstrate our character by the way we live – by the way we act. I can 'put on' truth the way one might fasten a belt around one's waist, but I can do so only by demonstrating behavior consistent with the principle of truth. Said another way, I can't think or talk my way into truth; I have to practice my way into it. And the same can be said for the other principles mentioned among the articles of spiritual armor – goodness or righteousness, peace, faith, courage and salvation. Spiritual principles are not items to be owned; they are behaviors to be practiced. And that is what the author of Ephesians is urging us to do – to practice these principles.

I am not perfect, and I will never practice anything perfectly. No one can be said to demonstrate perfect character throughout a lifetime. We human creatures are too error-prone for that. Perfect integrity is an impossible ideal toward which we nevertheless can strive.

And we must *strive* toward it. Practicing integrity is hard work. We must do battle with our own selfish desires, complacency and apathy in order to practice the principles of truth, goodness, courage, peace and faith. We can't simply do what feels good, for when we do, other's interests are neglected, exploited, or otherwise harmed. No human being can afford to completely ignore the needs and rights of others in the way he or she chooses to behave. We are too closely connected for any man to be an island all to himself.

Progressive Christian theology in the twenty-first century calls Christ's followers to act as co-creators with God, accepting with God the responsibility to establish and nurture that which is good on earth - good not only for human beings, but for all creation. Acknowledging ourselves as co-creators with God prohibits our ignoring the damage being done to our physical world as if it doesn't matter, as if the earth is nothing more than a natural resource to be exploited for human benefit. It's time we stop thinking of ourselves as beneficiaries of God's good creation and begin to think of ourselves as protectors of it – guardians of its goodness.

Now when I hear the author of Ephesians refer to “the cosmic powers of this present darkness, (and) the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places,” I no longer think of demons, or hell, or eternal fire. Now I think of industries that exist to exploit the non-renewable resources of our planet, like insatiable miners who would dig and blast and dig and blast until the entire earth is nothing more than a played-out mine, a site to be abandoned, from which to escape to the next frontier to be exploited for its valuable resources.

Only we don't know of any unexploited new frontier that will sustain human life. This earth is all we currently have, and most human beings alive today act as if either its resources are inexhaustible or the problem of limited resources isn't their concern. I happen to think that the welfare of our planet is a concern of all of us. Just as the welfare of its human population is a concern of all of us. Just as the welfare of all living creatures on earth is a concern of all of us. We are definitely “all in this together.”

The last point I'd like to make about putting on the full spiritual armor of God is that in this Ephesians' metaphor God doesn't dress us. We have to dress ourselves.

We have to take responsibility to do our part. God provides the armor and invites us to equip ourselves to do God's work in our world by using the tools God provides. But we don't *have* to dress out. We don't have to play the game. God doesn't require our participation in this battle of good versus evil, and truth versus falsehood, courage versus cowardice, peace versus war, and faith versus cynicism. Rather God invites us into the struggle and offers us spiritual principles by which we can live, or not. It is our choice.

The lesson of the Genesis story of Cane and Abel, I think, is that we *are* our brother's keeper. We *are* responsible for the welfare of others, insofar as we are not to cause them harm by either our actions or our inactions. And that responsibility extends now to all creation – the earth, her air and waters, her plants and creatures, and all her peoples. God made us, and God made us keepers. To shirk our responsibility to God's creation, I believe, is sin. Apathy and neglect of Earth's welfare now constitute evil - evil which isn't supernatural to me, at all, but completely natural to the human race, when we, as a species, demonstrate little concern beyond our own self-interests.

Ephesians tells us that our battle is not against flesh and blood but against cosmic powers of darkness and spiritual forces of evil. But these 'forces' are not mystical or other-worldly. They are our own greed, our lust for constant satisfaction, our selfishness, apathy, violence, hate, fear and cynicism. These are our spiritual enemies. These are our demons.

God provides armor that we can choose to take up if we decide to join the battle against these 'dark' powers. We can take up truth by practicing truth in all that we do, and peace by practicing peace. We can take up courage, and goodness and faith. We can take up godliness, if and when we choose to dress ourselves in godliness.

But it's still something we have to do for ourselves.

Let us pray.

God, please teach us to discipline ourselves to care for brothers and sisters who are neighbors and strangers, fellow travelers on a pilgrim way, and for the earth and all her creatures. Teach us again that self-restraint is virtuous, and remind us that prudence is goodness. Give us clean hearts and clean hands, O Lord, that we might serve you in wisdom and in truth. Amen.