

Jon Hauerwas – August 26, 2018 – The Force  
Ephesians 6:10-20 and Psalm 84:9-12

Over the past 50 years, many Western Christians have become far more introspective and analytical about the role of our faith relative to the Crusades and colonization. As a result, a number of hymns have fallen out of favor among historic, mainline traditions. Among these is “Onward Christians Soldiers.”

Still a fixture among many people of faith, this 19<sup>th</sup> century English hymn was excluded from *Glory to God*, the most recent Presbyterian hymnbook published in 2013; as well as *Sing the Faith* from 2003; and the blue, *Presbyterian Hymnal*, which was introduced to our worshiping communities in 1990. The rationale for excluding “Onward Christians Soldiers” is quite simple. Our hymns are a reflection of our theology. And as people who claim to worship the Prince of Peace, it is problematic, at best, to celebrate the real or perceived triumphs of a conquering, Christian army.

So what are we to make of our first lesson this morning – with all of its talk of struggle, of forces, and of standing firm? What are we to say about securing the armor and fastening the belt? What are we to make of positioning the breastplate and taking up the shield? Or of seating the helmet and drawing the sword? Is this not the language of war?

Well, let's take a closer look. First, the passage says, "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against... cosmic powers... and spiritual forces." In other words, there are unseen powers at work in this world. This, and not some segment of humanity, is our true enemy. The words cosmic and spiritual suggest the existence of something sinister beyond the intentions of the human psyche and condition, and far from the marauding language consistent with previous, Western conquests.

Next, all but one of the items listed here is defensive rather than offensive in purpose. Armor. Belt. Breastplate. Shield. Helmet. While these are certainly the instruments of war, none of them is typically used to launch an attack. Instead, each is intended for personal protection and preservation. The message is clear: when the enemy attacks, we ought to be prepared to defend ourselves.

Finally, while this passage is metaphorical, the author's intentions are never hidden. It is the armor of God. The belt of truth. The breastplate of righteousness. The shield of faith. Even the lone offensive weapon named here is the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And, I might add, God's word is hardly an instrument of violence. So what is this scripture really getting at?

Will Willimon is a highly acclaimed Methodist bishop, author, theologian, and Duke Divinity School professor who claims that our only sure defense is in letting go of self. As part of his vocation, Willimon fields a lot of questions. He was once asked to reflect on “the pause” that occurs in those last fleeting moments just before he stands up to preach. “What do I think about?” he writes. “I pondered this question and I realized *not much*. Before that moment, I confess that I do sometimes wonder, *How do I look? Am I going to do well? Will they like what I have to say? Have I come here today with the right sermon, at the right time, for the right congregation? Will they like me?*”<sup>1</sup>

“But in that pause, in that moment before I preach,” Willimon continues, “I find that I am not thinking about anything except the sermon. My whole being is caught up, focused on the demands of the sermon. I become what I am intending to preach.” He likens our relationship with God to being consumed by love. “If a relationship develops, we find ourselves no longer thinking in terms of ‘I’ and ‘you,’ but rather in terms of ‘us’ and we.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, *Lectionary Sermon Resource: Year B Part 2*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 134.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

“Something very much like that happens to the believer and Jesus Christ. We find ourselves being drawn out of ourselves and into Christ. We find that we are thinking less about ourselves and more about others. Our needs seem to grow smaller as we are given more responsibility for the needs of others.”<sup>3</sup>

And when temptation arises, as it often will, we need not face it alone. Rather, with Christ serving as a resounding alarm for the present danger and the impenetrable armor amid the present struggle, we are, at last, both attuned to and in solidarity with him.

Yesterday, members of Westminster Presbyterian participated in the annual Pride Parade on Market Street and the festival that followed at Hardesty Park. For many in the Akron community and beyond, it was a celebration of freedom and solidarity. I participated, not because I am part of the LGBTQ community myself, but because, as Willimon reminds us, “It’s not about us; it’s about the one who is the bread of life.” Indeed, “it is a great gift to have one’s life swept up in a meaning and mission greater than oneself. It is a great gift to give us modern, Western people the

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 135.

means to something more significant to think about, something more important to live for, than ourselves.”<sup>4</sup> May it be so, and all thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.