

Pentecost 13B (Proper 17)
Ephesians 6:10-20
August 30, 2009

The story is told about a boxer who was being pummeled in the ring by his opponent. Blow after blow, round after round, he absorbed enough punishment to leave him with a bloody nose, swollen eyes, and an enormous amount of pain. His trainer, trying to encourage him between rounds, kept saying, “You’re doing great! That bum is barely touching you.” To which the boxer responded, “Then you better keep your eye on that referee, because somebody is really killing me!”

No amount of smooth talk psycho-babble could camouflage the reality of the bloody battle in which this fighter was engaged. In the same way, all of us who are Christians are engaged in a very real battle of cosmic proportion. No war in history can compare with one which wages around us right now. Yet, many Christians haven’t a clue that they’re involved in a “no quarter given” war waged in every area of their life. The truth is, from the moment of your Baptism or from the instant you came to faith in Jesus as Savior, you entered into the mother of all battles, which has been raging since Genesis 3. Unfortunately, there is no bunker you can crawl into and wait for the battle to pass by. We don’t get to rotate out of the combat zone after a year-long deployment. We are in a 24/7/365 struggle that will consume our remaining days.

Granted, we’re in for a struggle. Much is at stake, both now on Earth and forever in eternity. Thankfully, St. Paul drops in today to give us insight into how to armor up for this fight. But his advice won’t make much sense if we don’t have good grasp on what is at stake. Every war is waged for certain goals. Whether it is something as noble as “making the world safe for democracy” or as complicated as “some damned fool thing in the Balkans” or as personal as King Menelaus of Sparta launching the Trojan War to recover Helen, his kidnapped wife, there’s an objective at stake. This is equally true in the ancient but very present battle in the spiritual realm. In this fight, YOU are the prize! Why? Because you’re simply that valuable! And what about you is so valuable and so worth the time and attention of the powers in this war? It is your soul.

OK, if I asked for a show of hands to see who has recently calculated the value of their investments, we might have a sizeable response. If I asked for a show of hands of those who had recently meditated on the value of their immortal soul, we might have a few less. We just aren’t trained to think this way! We’re very used to considering material things as precious and we can make judgments on the basis of relative worth. We know an ounce of gold is more valuable than an ounce of Gatorade—it’s not an even trade. But simply because we’ve never really thought about the inherent worth of our soul, its value isn’t at all lost on the spiritual realm. Angels and demons, which are pure spirit, are in a unique position to evaluate the abyss which separates the spiritual from the material creation—and are both groups are highly interested in human souls. Maybe we should be also. Jesus Himself warns us, *“For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”* (Mt 16:26)

What is the soul? Did you see that Simpsons episode where Bart sold his soul to Milhouse for \$5? Lisa warned him that he would regret it because the soul is not something you have, but rather is you in the profundity of your “self”—it’s what allows us to comprehend, choose, decide, love, etc. Our soul is what enables us to come before God with the possibility of knowing, hearing, and receiving from Him. The soul is the most precious thing in creation. Such

is the value of a soul that even just for one, Jesus would have suffered and died. Nothing in the universe is more important than a soul and nothing dearer to God, who loves us as sons and daughters and has prepared for us the greatest things His omnipotence could allow. Could there be anything greater than His gift of allowing us to participate in the divine nature? (2 Pet 1:4)

Satan is jealous of all this. He, who wanted to be like God, challenges Him, competing with Him for every soul. It's a deadly serious "game" of trying to seduce us away from God and to make us his own. It's personal here! Every soul torn away from Jesus is a triumph for Satan. The good news is that he cannot seize you without your consent. On the other hand, neither will God—because He will not violate your freedom to respond to His love. Much of this is up to us and since we're in this battle to end, it's essential we know our enemy so to avoid his snares and fight back with the appropriate weapons.

In today's epistle, St. Paul gives us a look inside the armory and explains the hardware. But how and where do we use them? What direction do we point them? In the Catechism, Dr. Luther identifies three "enemies" to which we should never lower our guard--our flesh, the world, and the devil. Frankly, our worst enemy is not Satan but ourselves! We have to be vigilant because hiding behind the insatiable desires of our flesh and the vanity of our "pride of life" stuff lays our adversary. Your ability to discover him in your daily situations is crucial to successful resistance. Don't fool yourself. If you travel in the way of sin, Satan keeps you on a leash. If you don't get free in time, you belong to him for all eternity. It's warfare. It's for real. There are no "do overs."

Now, having laid that before you, Paul advises us "*to put on the whole armor of God.*" The first piece is the "*belt of truth.*" A Roman soldier wore a belt which would hold his tunic tight so he might move about freely, while providing a place for him to hang his sword. The imagery here is that truth holds together all other virtues, making them effective. Putting on God's truth means living out His word, being honest and sincere in our faith. It refers to Christian character and integrity, a lifestyle that conforms to the Scripture.

St. Paul moves next to the "*breastplate of righteousness.*" The purpose of the breastplate is to guard the body's vital organs. It's the Kevlar vest of its day. Righteousness is the first gift of God that was given us through the Cross, where our sins are covered by the blood of the Lamb. The condition of the heart controls the course of our lives. When we put on the breastplate of righteousness, we acknowledge our need to remain free from sin. Here's where we avail ourselves of the Sacraments, all of which convey forgiveness, but especially Confession where we can experience, in a unique way, the absolution spoken into our souls.

After the breastplate, Paul speaks about "*feet shod with the gospel of peace.*" The Roman military boot was designed for long marches over every kind of rough terrain. In fact, it has been said these boots were the secret of the Roman conquest. Christians are to be prepared for long marches through all difficulties. The gospel gives us the stability for sure footing, allowing us the ability to march over the rough terrain of life without giving up. We are to be prepared to share the gospel of peace at any time, to have a missionary zeal, being open to the Holy Spirit's leading in specific situations.

Next Paul encourages us to, "*take up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one.*" One of the most dangerous weapons of ancient warfare were fiery darts. The heads of the darts were wrapped and soaked in pitch, then set afire before being launched. Obviously, wooden shields upon which they landed could be set aflame by the arrows so they were covered with a layer of hide and even though the darts would pierce the shield, the fire would be quenched. When we take the Great Commission seriously and

go on the offense, the enemy is going to fight back. He will attack us and everything associated with us--our church, spouse, children, business, everything. And our shield against these attacks is faith—our trust in God and in His ability to protect us.

“And take the helmet of salvation.” The helmet protects the head, the place of our thought life. Satan bombards us with fear, hatred, suspicion, depression, mistrust, and a host of other distractions. Salvation is not only forgiveness of past sins, it is the strength to overcome and conquer present and future sins. In wearing the helmet we have confidence that nothing can separate us from the love of God. *“So if God be for us, who can be against us?”*

Now all these are defensive weapons, but God also gives us offensive weapons so that we can actively engage the enemy. We are combatants, not spectators in this war. St. Paul says for us to *“take up the sword of the spirit.”* The author of Hebrews tells us *“the word of God is quick and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword.”* Obviously, he is referring to Sacred Scripture, but the sword can also be words of knowledge or discernment spoken in the power of the Spirit through preaching, teaching, witnessing or prophesying to assist us in defending ourselves against Satan and inflicting harm on him.

Finally, Paul mentions a highly neglected, but extremely powerful weapon--praying in the Spirit. *“What does this mean?”* There are two ways and both are fantastic! You probably don't want to hear this, but in Scripture, *“praying in the spirit”* mostly refers to praying in tongues. St. Paul makes a clear distinction between praying with the mind and praying in the Spirit. *“For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.”* (1 Cor 14:14ff) But does *“praying in the Spirit”* only mean praying in tongues? *“Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues”* (1 Cor 12:29ff) Clearly, Paul expects a negative answer. Not every Christian prays in tongues. But every Christian does need to pray in the Spirit.

Praying in the Spirit simply recognizes the Holy Spirit interceding for us as He guides our prayers and helps us in our weakness. Yes, this can be done through praying in tongues, but it can also be done through praying English. We don't know what we are praying when we pray in tongues, but the Holy Spirit takes charge. And that's equally true when we pray in English. When our prayers ascend to the Father, it is the Holy Spirit who knows our burdens and our needs and He knows as well what is God's will and what is best for us. It means that we recognize the Holy Spirit as the one who prays our prayers to God. The Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groaning too deep for words in either case.

Today, St. Paul wants us to be well equipped to deal with the daily spiritual battles that come our way. Maybe you're not as prepared for battle as you'd like to be. You can begin to change that right now. When you come and as you kneel here to receive the Blessed Sacrament, ask the Holy Spirit to fill your life and begin to transform you from the inside out. Ask God to clothe you in this armor and to train you to fight this battle. While ultimate victory is assured by Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of the Father, the casualties won't cease until that day when *“he shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.”* In between now and then are many days of battle. Don't be afraid! The enemy cannot mortally wound you if you're wearing God's armor. You have everything you need. You are baptized. You are fed at this altar. The One who lives in you is greater than the one who is in the world and so you can not only withstand the evil one, but become a threat to him on the field of battle. Amen.