

"The Armor of God"

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson - Isaiah 52:1-2, 7-10
New Testament Lesson – Ephesians 6:10-17

"Striking teachers in Chicago manned the picket lines for a second day ... as parents again scrambled to occupy their stay-at-home kids." That was how NPR began its report last week of the Chicago teachers' strike. This sermon carries no opinion on the strike one way or another, but confrontations such as this do illustrate the modern-day battles that play out in our lives all the time – kids who want to stay up late and parents who want them to get their rest (and give the parents a rest, as well); freeway drivers who want to occupy the exact same piece of roadway as you at the exact same time, and they let you know it in no-uncertain-yet-very-dangerous terms; friends who get mad at each other and stopping hanging out together; couples or other family members who drift apart or push away from each other, with neither one willing to take a step toward healing the relationship; or maybe it's with an employer, neighbor or even with the church that we have irreconcilable differences. People end up on opposite sides all the time and can't seem to get around what's blocking them. And more often than not, what's blocking them is nothing physical as much as something spiritual. We call it the "principle of the thing," and when battle lines have been drawn, "the principle of the thing" becomes a barrier to all that is good in life – peace, hope, love, and community. It's an age-old problem with an age-old solution. If we want to be free of misguided forces in our lives, then we need to be prepared to stand up against them.

In the 1930s serving under President Franklin D. Roosevelt as head of the Works Progress Administration (or the WPA), Brehon Somervell was confronted with a "sit-down" strike, as each side took a stand, if you will against the other Union members took over a public building and refused to leave. After police had tried and failed to end the strike, Somervell found a more effective (and more peaceful) solution: He locked each of the building's bathrooms – and went home with the keys. Six hours later, the strike was over. If my wife had been there, it would have been one hour. Regardless of your stance on unions, Somervell did demonstrate that there can be a very real and physical solution to even the most spirited or principled disputes and difficulties in life.

The Apostle Paul points to this in today's New Testament lesson, when he says, "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."

The cosmic powers and spiritual forces of evil? What are those? Well, these are the things that allow us to stand on principle while trampling on people. They are "evil" and misguided forces that take up residence in "heavenly places" to use Paul's term, such "heavenly places" as the heart and soul of humanity. And to protect us from such forces of evil the church outfits us in what Paul calls the "**armor of God.**"

Now we don't see people walking around in military armor like they did in Paul's day. So it's kind of hard to understand what he means by "the belt of truth," "the breastplate of righteousness," "shoes that make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace," "the shield of faith," and the "helmet of salvation." But in this era when we turn to medical science and better nutrition to cure our physical ailments, we can think of the "armor of God" as those things we do to protect or regain our spiritual if not also physical health and happiness: the practical, physical things we do or don't do that affect our overall wellbeing. Our bodies need certain things everyday to be healthy. And just as there are "minimum daily requirements" for us to stay physical healthily, we also have spiritual requirements, spiritual needs that affect our overall wellbeing, depending on whether we meet or fulfill those needs or neglect them. And the fact that Paul warns us about "spiritual forces of evil" shows just how hard it is for us to keep focused on our spiritual needs, our spiritual defenses against attacks from all sides. And when I say all sides, I mean attacks from outside forces and attacks from within, such things as a self-defeating attitude, low self-esteem, a lack of hope or vision for the future, frustration and anger, pride and jealousy. These can be some of the most evil forces we face.

And one of the best defenses that we have readily at hand – our No. 1 spiritual Minimum Daily Requirement, is our community of faith.¹ Christians by definition are not isolated souls, loaners, do-it-yourselfers. When it comes to our spiritual health, no, we need each other. That's how we tap into the Spirit of Jesus Christ, which is with us wherever and whenever two or more are gathered. Family or small - group devotionals, prayer breakfasts, study circles, Bible groups, and accountability partners are all good ways to support one another in our Christian faith. The church bulletin regularly lists many opportunities to get connected Pick one or come up with one of your own and carve out a little time for it. Many of us have already found that connecting with other Christians helps us to meet the demands of life with more confidence, encouragement, and success. And God wants that for all of us. MDR #2 – Minimum Daily Requirement #2 – is Spiritual Exercises. We all get physical exercise everyday. Every time you get out of bed or go for a walk – or better yet to the gym or the ball field – you work the muscles in your arms and legs and torso. And it's the same with your spiritual muscles. Every time you say a prayer, thank God for life's blessings, or even turn to God in despair, you're making yourself stronger spiritually; better able to stand up to whatever life throws your way.

¹ Based on the writings of Bob Kaylor, pastor of Park City United Methodist Church in Park City, Utah.

And prayer actually supports us in MDR #1 – coming together or connecting as Christians – because it helps us draw closer to God who brought us together in the first place. And “prayer is not just an excuse for giving God a long list of requests – you know, ‘I’m gonna say my prayers now,’ yells a 6-year-old from up in his bedroom. ‘Anyone want anything?’” No, think of prayer as your spiritual aerobic exercise – as we exhale our deepest needs, our love, and our praise, and inhale God’s presence, power and peace. Prayer is what oxygenates the soul, says Bible commentator Bob Kaylor. I love that: prayer is what oxygenates the soul.

MDR #3 – I’ve got five for you today – MDR #3 is Mission Outreach. “A refreshed and strengthened spirit will naturally flow outward to others,” notes Kaylor. “No matter how ‘busy’ our lives become, our spiritual energy and health will suffer if it is hoarded, not shared in service.” It might be a simple act of love or a brief work of faith – like raiding you’re piggybank next week so we can buy Sunday school books for children in Guatemala. Wouldn’t it be great if the children of this church each had to carry two Noisy Offering cans just to hold it all? Talk about a refreshed and strengthened spirit! Daily Requirement #4 is Intermission- rest. Just like at a concert or halftime at the football game, taking a break from even the best life has to offer allows us to rest and regroup for what’s next. No one whose spiritual cupboard is bare can give of themselves to others.

Each day, we need to take some “time to be silent – to read, to meditate, to walk quietly in the world with open eyes and a closed mouth. Only by taking this kind of ‘intermission,’ says Kaylor, “are we equipped to help fulfill (God’s) “mission.”

And last but certainly not least, MDR #5 is our minimum daily requirement of the Word of God. “Thankfully our spiritual strength is not dependent on our own abilities, our own insights, our own wisdom. As Christians, “we have a record of God’s continuing activity in the world, God’s words of love and guidance and judgment” speaking to all creation. But do you actually read a bit of scripture each day and seek to apply it your life? Some do, some don’t. Yet all Christians need a dose of scripture as part of our minimum daily requirement for spiritual health. Whether it’s a Post-It-Note on the bathroom mirror with a favorite Bible verse or a line from our favorite hymn, or a Bible app on your Smartphone or computer desktop, or the actual “Good Book” for an inspirational devotional at your bedside or in your office desk drawer; No matter what you use to engage with God’s word, reading scripture everyday can turn your life around, spiritually and physically – and even turn this whole world around.

It’s just not enough – for our own health and vitality – to show up for worship on Sunday once in awhile. That’s a starting point, a place where we can learn about “the Whole Armor of God.” But to be truly outfitted for life as spiritual beings, don’t you think we all could do a little more to meet our minimum daily spiritual requirements – MDSRs 1-5: connecting as Christians, doing spiritual exercises such as daily prayer, reaching out in mission and service to others, taking time for intermission or spiritual rest, and reading scripture.

I suspect we all have some of this in our lives on a regular basis, but we also all have areas of spiritual weakness. What does the Apostle Paul say about weakness? Paul encourages us to (quote) “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.” And scripture tells us that the power of the Lord is not found in what the world considers strong, but in meekness; not in what the world considers wise, but in the self-giving foolishness of the cross; not in the confidence of well-reasoned arguments, but in the assurance of unsearchable faith.

Can I prove to you that taking on any of the spiritual practices mentioned this morning will make you happier, richer, and more successful? No, I can't. But I can assure you that in any one of them there is something that is more joyful and heartwarming than happiness, more profitable than riches, and more triumphant than success as the world measure it. Because in going deeper into any of these – whether it be your faith community, prayer life, mission outreach, spiritual renewal, or daily scripture – a deeper commitment to any of these will lead you to something stronger than proof. They lead us to faith and hope, to the assurance of God's promises, which can stand up to and overcome all things.

What will you put on or take up or stand behind in order to protect yourself from what Paul calls “the wiles of the devil,” those things in our society and in the world at-large that threaten – not primarily our physical lives – but our spiritual well-being, our sense of peace, hope, love, and community. When you walk out of here today, what might you step into as a new and life-giving spiritual practice – Christian connectedness, prayer, outreach, renewal, scripture. Let us each pick one or more, and go with it.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, we thank you that you never ask us to do anything without equipping us to respond in obedience. You instill within us faith that allows us to trust you, rather than our circumstances. You give us your word, which illumines our path with truth. You give us your Spirit who empowers us, guides us and intercedes on our behalf. Thank you for these abundant and generous gifts, and help us to use them to your glory.

Dear God, help us each one us to live at peace with you, with ourselves, and with our neighbors. Help our nation to live at peace with other nations, so that we can turn our energy and our dollars from the tasks of destruction to the many needs of the poor. Help us to reorder our living so that we are more sensitive to those who have so very little.

Help us, too, to remember the sick and the lonely each day, not just once in a while. Remind us that all humankind are our neighbors, in you there are no strangers and no enemies;

**in the name of the greatest Peacemaker of all, Jesus the Christ,
who taught us to pray, saying:**

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom
come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we
forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us
from evil.**

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.