

Pentecost B-14, 2009

August 23, 2009

Ephesians 6: 10-20; John 6: 56-69

Title: Armed and Not Dangerous

Grace to you and peace from God and from the Lord Jesus....

The day after our daughter Elizabeth's marriage to Dan Burris we held a brunch at our home for out of town guests. In preparation for that day Sally and I had throughout the spring prepared our yard. We had not been the types who would have ever won yard of the month, but on June 29, our digs were looking their best.

Folks were very complimentary, especially those who had seen the place before the transformation. I subsequently joked that the wedding was simply background for a renewed yard. As the day drew to a close I was standing outside on our driveway admiring Our garden with my brother-in-law and nephew Tommy. Tommy was very complimentary about the yard and he noticed that our garden included a carpet of grass which hung over a side wall, dangling toward the pavement.

He rather innocently asked how that grass could possibly be alive. Did it somehow attach itself to the wall? It was the kind of question which deserved a closer inspection. So I went over to the grass in question and lifted it off the wall. And there to our surprise was a copperhead snake lying beneath the grass. Once I composed myself I dispatched with the snake.

All morning the children of our guests had innocently played just a few feet from this serpent. We were unawares!

We must enter our home beside that grassy area daily. We walk by it with a different awareness than we did before June 29. We have adjusted our walk, but we have not avoided this place of danger. I don't go there any more with bare hands. I go with a hoe nearby and clippers in my hands.

Is it possible to have enough equipment on to withstand any serpent? Are we able to store up enough to ward off any poison, any source of decay, any virus, any invading harm?

Today a hoe is insufficient armor when facing the attacks that poison our hearts, attacks that disable. A pair of clippers is no match for the giant power of indifference and apathy. A hoe cannot cut the head off of greed; clippers are broken when anger turns to hatred.

It is possible to have enough equipment to withstand the serpent?

Our kindergarteners leave the security of home, venturing out to classrooms where they are exposed to things over which we cannot fully protect them. Language, bullies, excessive competition.... To name a few.

Our college freshmen depart from the security of home. At a recent gathering their parents evoked some fears about this life transition: falling into a party life style; rejecting their faith; turning a deaf ear to our advice. Some serpents they may willingly pick up. We are aware that this is not a neutral world, how do we withstand the serpent?

Last Sunday our Summerfest troupe delightfully portrayed the full armor of God described in Ephesians 6. Two persons, Joseph Cooper and Brooke Boyer, by the end of the musical were fully equipped. Brooke and Joseph are featured on today's bulletin cover. They withstood every attack of the serpent, standing firm, as we witnessed their being given the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the spirit.

What this play dramatized were two people who were ready for life in this world. They stand before us as an image of the whole church. No one among those who follow Jesus may be fully equipped. We may spend a life time and never become so fully equipped. But we are part of the body of Christ who together may be strong in the Lord. For Brooke and for Joseph armor was not self generated. It was a gift

from God...the full armor of God. This armor was not much armor at all...

- ...tap on Joseph Cooper's nerf helmet and it gave way
- ...grab a hold of Brooke Boyer's sword and it would not cut you
- ...push against the shield and it would bend
- ...pull on the belt and its Velcro released

It is a fitting image for the kind of armor God in Christ strengthens his church.

Under the arming power of the spirit we seek to live at peace with others. The serpent says the way to deal with those you can't get along with is to put them out of your life. Jesus invites his people to be bearers of peace. Shoes on your feet are for walking, for walking toward others.

In one of Anne Tyler's novels the central character lives with such brokenness toward others, that one day on the beach, she takes a walk and just keeps on walking. Armed with feet to get away, she never comes back. It is a picture of the power of such pain.

Our arming God calls us back. We can start over, we can live beyond woundedness.

The serpent lurks, eroding our trust, calling us to see in our past reason to close the doors of our heart.

Nevertheless, Jesus feeds us with the hope of peace. He comes to us, we are to eat well and be strengthened at his nourishing table.

Near the end of John 6, while many of his disciples are deserting Jesus because of his teachings, Jesus asks the twelve if they too desire to leave. Peter comes forward with the very words we use to hear the gospel: "Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life." A profound declaration of faith. When you make such confessions you get bound up in the one you believe in. The direction and purpose of your life is clarified, given focus. Peter names and claims faith in Jesus. Jesus the one who invited Peter to step out of the boat. Jesus the one who called the dead to life.

Jesus, the one who frees the paralyzed. Jesus doesn't intend we have dead end lives.

Brothers and sisters, to be strong in the Lord is life work. Not done in a day. Christ Jesus yearns to equip us with His sustaining gifts. They are new each day. We are invited to receive them, again and again.

And we are to receive them in prayer. As Ephesians says, "persevere in supplication for all the saints." A prayerful heart is enlarged before the painful realities of this life. We are not called to resignation. We are called to prayer. By so living we immerse ourselves in the ways of Jesus...we bend our hearts toward others. In one sense the armor of God is defensive...and given to defend others.

For all the saints. For Pastor Jennifer as she prepares to return to us. For Terry Westbrook and Thelma and Whitney as they prepare to receive Terry home, home from war. For Brian Grimes as he steps in as our Interim Youth Director. For Vicar Nathaniel Anderson as he and Carolyn are launched into our faith community. For those youth heading off to college; for those children in kindergarten. For all the saints bound up in the strength of the Lord.

We are not to ignore the serpents powers...rather we are to live before them knowing that God is equipping his Church. To so live is to be alert and alive---armed and not dangerous.

Lord, to whom shall we go. You have the words of eternal life.

