

Get Dressed!

Ephesians 6:10-20

August 23, 2009

Last Christmas I gave my wife, Dorothy, a year's membership to the Columbus Museum of Art. A couple of weeks ago we decided that we should use it. We were taking care of our grandson, Evan, and for some unknown reason to us now thought he would enjoy the experience.

Well, he did in his own way. He sort of rushed from room to room so that he could confirm that there was indeed a bench in each room. And then, while we attempted to catch a few glimpses of some of the artwork hanging on the walls he would enthusiastically climb onto each bench, lie down for a few moments, and then jump back up encouraging us to enter into his fascination with the benches in the Museum of Art.

When we joined his mother later in the day for dinner, she asked him what he most enjoyed about the day. After some gentle reminding on our part of what all we did, he finally gleefully shouted out: "benches!"

There's no question that taking children with you to the museum changes the experience. Another preacher put it this way: "You know you've crossed into some new station in your life when you visit the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art and realize as you are leaving that you completely skipped all the paintings. That's right, the entire Renaissance wing just was not on the agenda. Suddenly it hits you: You are no longer a student, or a tourist, or an art lover. No, you are a parent of small, squirming children who need to see something big, and strong, and hard-hitting."¹

This preacher went on to recall the more popular places he ended up spending time with the children he accompanied – the pyramids with their huge tombs and temples and mummies and caskets. But, perhaps the area that drew the most attention were the rooms of ancient weaponry. The armored warhorses with metal encased soldiers on their backs and wearing heavy clothing of protection are nothing short of fascinating. The armor was designed with an eye both to battle and for showing off in parades. Some of the armor was so heavy and elaborate that fighting had to have been almost impossible.²

When Paul wrote the portion of the letter he sent to the church at Ephesus which we read this morning, he counted on the Ephesians having in their heads a clear image of the military attire necessary for a Roman soldier to effectively do his job.

He knew when he mentioned "the belt of truth" his listeners could visualize the wide, thick belt the soldiers wore to protect their stomachs and lower abdomen areas. He wanted them to understand the reason it was important for them to be truthful to one another about one another was because rumors and gossip can destroy a community of faith.

When he mentioned "the breastplate of righteousness" and "the helmet of salvation" he knew they could visualize the items of military attire that protected the head and heart – the symbols of our emotions and reasoning. He wanted them to understand that our emotions and our reasoning need constant attention – constant monitoring. He wanted to remind them that their eternal safety was sure because of the mighty act of grace. Remembering this protects the heart and head and enables us to think and do the right things.

And when he mentioned "shoes for your feet" he knew they would be thinking about how important it was for a soldier to be able to move quickly while maintaining reliable footing. "Shoes for your feet ...ready to proclaim the gospel of peace" was offered by Paul to challenge the community of faith to move quickly in order to share the good news of Jesus Christ. It's also possible that he was suggesting that if followers kept on the move they would be less likely to be guilty of idleness and doubt.

When he mentioned "the shield of faith" Paul was utilizing the Ephesians knowledge of the way shields were made and used in battle. Opponents of the Roman army attempted to get the soldiers to drop their shields by shooting fiery arrows at the shields. Their thinking was that if they could set the shields on fire some of the

soldiers would attempt to put out the fire thus weakening the line of defense. As a result Roman shields were made of heavy wood and then covered with leather. The leather was soaked in water before the legion went to do battle. What Paul was trying to convey to his followers was that it takes the whole community working together to repel attempts at destroying our spirituality.

Finally, when Paul mentioned "the sword" he knew those reading his letter would have in their minds the 20 – 24 inch long weapons used when the fighting took on a more hand-to-hand combat style. Soldiers had to be skilled in their use of their swords if they were going to survive. The assault sin and temptation utilizes in our lives is best addressed when we are prepared with scripture and the revelation of God's spirit within the words of scripture. The sword is the only offensive weapon mentioned in this text. One preacher wisely and appropriately offered: "There are lots of 'offensive' Christians out there; but the offense we're to employ is one that hits people not with condemnation and judgment but with the good news."³

I shortened my comments on the different elements of the military clothing Paul referenced as important in order for us to adequately get dressed for daily living in today's text because this military imagery is sandwiched between two other things Paul thought were important if we are to get dressed. He started this portion by offering an encouraging word: "Don't give up," "Hang in there," "Keep going despite all the odds," "be full of hope."

A few years back The Atlanta Journal-Constitution wrote a story about Terry Stout, the business manager for the psychiatry department at Emory University Hospital. One day when he arrived at work he decided to park on the top of the parking garage rather than in his regular slot. He just wanted to look at the sky for a few more minutes before heading into the building for the day.

Well, as he got out of his car he noticed a woman standing on a beam sticking out from the parking garage. It was obvious that things weren't as they should be. Terry carefully set down his bag and slowly walked over to her. When he asked her if he could help, she shared that she was confused and had committed some sins and simply wanted to go be with Jesus.

As Terry listened to her he shared with her that God forgave her and that she could enjoy peace and happiness in her life if she trusted God to do that for her. A crowd gathered – a psychiatrist joined Terry and the two of them spoke to the woman.

At one point, Terry offered the woman a pin he was wearing. The words "There's Hope" were on it. He told her that Jesus and the community of faith that followed him could help and that he would pray with her if she returned to the roof. Finally, the girl did move to the roof. Everyone rushed to her wanting to surround and comfort her. Terry motioned them to slow down and invited them to kneel and hold hands as he prayed. The article went on to share that the woman is doing much better and both she and Terry wear their "There's Hope" pin all the time.⁵

The other bookend of advice Paul offered for getting dressed is that we should pray at all times in prayer and supplication. When things go wrong – when things seem impossible – when nothing seems to be going right – when we are at our wit's end – sure we should pray then. But Paul offered that we should constantly be in prayer. Prayer keeps us communicating with God, the source of our strength. Praying for and with others helps create the community of faith. Paul relied on it when he was in prison. He was comforted with the idea that there were those on the outside of the prison walls who cared enough about his survival to hold him in prayer. It gave him strength to know that others were praying for him.⁶

Jane and Trish were teachers. They were leaving the school together one day when Jane asked: "How do you do it?"

"Do what?" Trish asked, pausing to lean up against the railing.

"Deal with this job. I've only been here a few days and I'm at the end of my rope. These kids are wild."

Trish opened her purse and pulled out a package of gum as she responded: "They're not so bad once you get to know them."

"I had someone swear at me today," Jane countered.

"Ouch," Trish said as she offered Jane a piece. "Your remedial class?"

"Yeah. I never knew that English class could get so colorful." Jane unwrapped the piece of gum and continued: "I asked him a question and he just went off."

"The younger Johnson boy, I bet."

"How did you know?"

"He's been a handful for everyone who's had him."

"Well, he'll never do that to me again."

"Why?"

"I'm going to tell Jim that I won't take him back."

"Oh," Trish responded as she looked at the kids gathering for the late bus. "See that tall boy there?" she continued.

"The one with the tattoo on his neck?" Jane asked.

"Yes, that's the one. That's the older Johnson boy. I had him a couple of years back. He caused me many sleepless nights."

"Huh. It must run in the family." Jane stopped talking as the boy in question turned around and yelled at them: "I got in!"

"I heard. Congratulations!" Trish shouted back with a big smile on her face. She turned to Jane and said: "He got a scholarship to State."

"What's he going to take?"

"English, actually. He told me he wants to be a teacher."

"I thought you said he was a handful."

"He was," Trish said. "He threatened to pull a knife on me my first week here. Things got worse from there."

Jane's eyes went wide. "How did you deal with him?"

"I prayed."

At first Jane laughed but then she noticed that Trish wasn't laughing. "You're serious."

"Very. That was my first week teaching and I almost didn't come back."

"I can't believe you thought about quitting. You have so much patience with the kids. You're a natural at this."

"No, I'm not," Trish said. "I have my bad days and days when I wonder what I am doing."

"Really?"

"Yes, but then I remind myself what this is really about." Trish looked at Jane. "Were you serious about wanting to know how I do it?"

Jane nodded.

"I pray before the day starts to remember that this isn't about teaching facts or information but about helping young people grow into adults. I pray for patience and calm and wisdom and strength." Trish paused to watch the kids getting on the bus. "When I'm praying I think about what I need to get through the day and ask God to help me wear it for everyone to see. I ask God to surround me with kindness, mercy, and grace."

"Does that work?" Jane asked.

Trish smiled. "Yes, it works, but sometimes the days are so crazy I'm stretched to my limit. That's why I take time to pray when I'm alone during my prep class as well."

"Huh," Jane said as the bus pulled away. "That helped you with kids like the older Johnson boy?"

"It helps me to be a better Christian and a better person. That helps me work with the kids who come to us so hurt and angry that they don't want to learn and don't trust anyone."

"I wonder if I could reach the younger Johnson boy." Jane stared thoughtfully at the empty schoolyard. "Do you think we could meet somewhere before school tomorrow and pray about it?"

"I'd love to," Trish said and together they headed down the stairs.⁷

Friends, there is no question that we are living in some challenging times. Our values and beliefs are often not popular and questioned and cast aside. There's no question that if we are going to make it in this life we are going to need to get dressed – dressed with hope, truth, righteousness, a readiness to spread the good news, faith, knowledge of salvation, the Spirit, the word of God, prayer. Paul didn't promise anywhere in scripture that we won't get hurt in this conflict in which we are engaged. It's going to take all of us working together, caring for one another, encouraging one another, reminding one another to get dressed.

Let us pray.

1. Leonard Sweet, "It's Humble or the Umbles," www.homileticsonline.com.
2. Ibid.
3. Leonard Sweet, "The Liquid Armor of God," Homiletics, July – August, 2009, p. 64.
4. King Duncan, "Advice For Soldiers at the Front," www.esermons.com.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Peter Andrew Smith, "Equipped for Life," www.esermons.com.