

August 26, 2018 • 14th Sunday in Kingdomtide

“Shaping Up”

Sermon by the Rev. Larry Young



Ephesians 6:10-20

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For 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. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

I don't need to tell you that keeping in shape physically has become one of the major preoccupations of 21st century life. Medical advisors from all sides are telling us of the benefits that come from a physically active lifestyle; and many of us are taking it to heart. Now clergy as a group have often lagged on practicing this kind of body self-care. That was true for me at one point in my life; tending to spiritual agendas just seemed more important. But when my cholesterol reading got high enough, my doctor got through to me that something had to change. I needed to shape up physically. So for several years now I've been wearing a pedometer, as I know some of you have; and it has become a matter of priority for me to get a minimum number of steps in every day. My reward for this is that I have more energy and generally a more positive outlook on life; and yes, my cholesterol is under control.

Our readings from the book of Ephesians these last several Sundays have been offering us guidance for our spiritual health; and not surprisingly, today the writer concludes his argument with an appeal to spiritual strength. “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power,” he says. In other words you need to shape up spiritually if your life in Christ is going to have any substance and vitality to it. And this shaping up will not happen automatically. You must intentionally put on what he calls “the whole armor of God” that will enable you to stand firm in your faith.

It's clear that the Ephesians writer had some real threats to faith in mind as he wrote. He talks about rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, and the spiritual forces of evil. We can't be certain what all he was referring to, though persecution by rulers would seem one possibility. But he saw that the enemies of authentic faith were real. And it's important for us to recognize that the enemies of vital faith are just as real for us today. Often we just don't recognize them. After all, in our part of the world at least, Christians are not being persecuted for their faith. Rather Christianity is the dominant religion of our culture. We take pride in the Christian values that have shaped our society. Good works on behalf of the poor, the sick, the persecuted, the down and out, are legendary. So what are our enemies? Why do our church membership vows still talk about opposing “the spiritual forces of wickedness” and rejecting the evil powers of this world? The answer is simply that values and attitudes and ways of living that are contrary to the teaching and spirit of Jesus are still very much alive and well in our world. And often they are all the more insidious because they are so subtle. They don't openly fight the Christian outlook; they mostly just ignore it. Let me give you a few examples:

1) What about lying and dishonesty in the workplace and the political sphere? A lot of people treat this as a non-issue today. You lie and mislead to whatever extent is necessary to produce a favorable outcome for your work or your cause. The relevant value here is not integrity; it's coming out ahead. And how easy it is to justify by simply noting that “everyone is doing it.”

2) We can't help but note how much violence saturates the media today, and how much violence spills over into real life. It's the movies with a lot of violence that draw the big crowds. And too often the idea persists that violence is the only way to resolve conflicts and achieve justice. The biblical scholar Walter Wink claims that many people have gotten hooked into what he calls the “myth of redemptive violence”—the idea that human nature being what it is, violence is the only way to get a desirable outcome. And so we are pushed to think of the use of violence and force as the only answer to international conflicts and social turmoil and crime and whatever issues come our way. To take Jesus seriously as the prince of peace is to believe this doesn't have to be a dog-eat-dog world, and that a respectful non-violent negotiation of differences can be a viable strategy. But it takes spiritual strength to hold to that faith in a violence-oriented world.

3) A third commonly-held enemy of our faith is our culture's pervasive conviction that getting material wealth is really the ultimate goal of life. As Christians we often lament the materialism we see all around us. Yet how easily we can get seduced by our own desires for enough of the comforts and the "good things" of life. What amount is "enough" of life's goodies? That can be a slippery slope—and all the more so to the extent we assume that the enjoyment of life is our number 1 priority. Many in our culture believe that. So how much will be required to meet our "enjoyment quota?" And to what extent will our focus on getting for ourselves derail us from actively caring for the well-being of our neighbor and for the common good?

So the danger that faces us is of losing our souls, not because what we believe is openly under attack, but because we don't recognize the subtle subversive forces in the culture around us. When we don't see the urgency of keeping in spiritual shape, or when we get distracted from it for whatever reason, we are in danger of losing what we have. So the call of Ephesians to shape up spiritually, to take up the whole armor of God, is just as relevant to us as it was to those 1st century Christians.

Now there's no one protocol for getting into spiritual shape, just as no one pattern of physical exercise works for everybody. But to me, two considerations are important. The first is intentionality. We approach our spiritual life with the full intention to grow in it, to deepen its meaning for us. In no way is it a passive approach; we don't just let the scripture reading or sermon wash over us without engaging it and trying to discern what meaning it has for life as we live it. And so the second consideration is interaction. We pay careful attention to what we think the scripture or sermon or anthem or prayers or group discussion are saying to our life; in other words we interact with these faith expressions to see what meaning they have for us personally. And if we can do this in the company of others, it may be all the better as we get the benefit of their thinking.

Now there's no getting around the fact that shaping up spiritually is going to require some effort on our part, just as being strong physically calls for trips to the gym and walking when we'd rather ride. It may be true that others are better at spiritual growth than we are, and have more to contribute to a mature understanding of our faith. But no one else but you can build the spiritual strength that undergirds your life. The theologian Marcus Barth made an interesting observation about the military images in this Ephesians passage. He notes that all the military equipment mentioned—the breastplate and shield and helmet—would have been worn not by a rank and file infantryman but by an officer—one with leadership responsibility for the battle. So did the infantrymen just get overlooked? No, Barth concluded, there are no mere infantrymen in this battle. We are all called to the status of disciplined officers. We are called to take responsibility for our own strength, and yes, for the strengthening we can contribute to others.

Christian spirituality in Poland today has gotten the reputation of being one of the bright spots of vital faith in a Europe generally marked as passive and lackluster in spiritual character. Poland's troubled post-war history seems to have pushed it to take its religious heritage very seriously. The Polish-born writer Jerzy Kosinski, who became a U.S. resident, was once asked in an interview whether his friends back in Poland were envious of the life he was leading in this country. "Envy really isn't an issue," he replied. "What matters to them is how alive one is. "They are more spiritual than we are in America and perhaps wiser. They care more about the contents of a man's soul than of his refrigerator. One is known in Poland for what one reads, not for what one drives."

I believe that vignette speaks to our situation as those called to be strong in spirit. We believe that the contents of our souls do matter, and so we care about the work of shaping up our spirits to be strong in the Lord. And we know we won't get what we want by using someone else's prepackaged religious steroids. So we reach out to discern what the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness and the shield of faith mean for our life in the spirit today. And as we do that, I believe by God's grace we are enabled to stand firm and be more the people God has called us to be in our time and place. Amen, and thanks be to God!