

FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

Ephesians 6:10-17

I was raised in the Church of the Brethren and have always taken the teaching of the church around peace and nonviolence very seriously. That, in combination with the fact that I have never been particularly assertive, has meant that I almost always shy away from fights.

I have never come close to being in a physical altercation and I can hardly ever remember actually yelling— even as a kid. The one exception I remember quite vividly is the time some mean girls from the neighborhood started slinging hurtful insults at me while they watched me play football with the neighborhood boys. The boys tried to stand up for me but to no avail. Finally, I decided I had to stand up for myself. I marched boldly over to the mean girls, planted my feet underneath me and in my most firm, threatening voice I gave them a piece of my mind. They looked a little surprised, shrugged at each other and walked away. I felt quite victorious. That lasted only a minute, however, because my mother had been in our backyard and heard what I had said to them. I was promptly sent to my room and grounded for 2 days because I had used a curse word. So much for victory.

If you don't like a fight, the current climate in our country is probably making you mighty unhappy. It certainly is me. Because unless you live under a rock, don't own a TV or never look at a newsfeed, you cannot get away from the fact that there is a lot of fighting going on right now. Some of it is political but some of it is deeper than that. Since the election of Donald Trump, issues that divide us around values and culture have become highly charged and polarized.

Most people believe that although the country has been heading toward a schism for decades, the Trump presidency has accelerated this trend. Today America is more divided than it has been at any point since the civil war. Across 10 measures that Pew Research Center has tracked on the same surveys since 1994, the average partisan gap has increased 15 percentage points in the past year, creating a 36-point difference on key issues between those who identify with one party or

the other. On issues like immigration, the environment and racial discrimination, the divide is at an all-time high.

In 2017, there were 8700 recorded protests. 74% of them were against the President and his policies. The Women's March, the airport protests over the travel ban, a Day Without Immigrants, the March for Science – to name a few.

And, of course, the protests are not just from one side. The President's campaign style rallies continue to be popular and protests supporting the current policy direction are occurring all over the country. It is estimated that between 6-9 million people have participated in a protest over the past year – about 3% of the US population. So, if you are looking for a fight, it is easy to find one right now – no matter what political side you are on.

All in all, I find it discouraging and exhausting. So you can imagine my dismay when I looked up the suggested lectionary passages to preach from today and turned to Ephesians 6. It's a passage about fighting.

Ephesians was written by Paul during one of his several incarcerations for preaching the gospel of Jesus. At the point of its writing many new churches have come into being. Christians, however, especially those who are outspoken and challenging the powers that be, are being jailed and persecuted. So Paul spends about half of this letter giving practical advice to these believers at Ephesus who are in a fight over their faith. He says, be unified, be moral, speak the truth, forgive, live carefully, organize your households with love, and, finally in Chapter 6, be strong in the Lord in order to stand up firmly against dark spiritual forces.

Many of the commentaries I read on this passage take very seriously the so-called dark spiritual forces. That is, they talked about Satan and principalities and powers. As I read the passage, given my life in 2018, I heard the passage differently. Although I do think there is evil in the world, I heard Paul's advice as applying to our real world – not the one darkened by Satan's wiles, but the one torn apart by partisan disagreement and animosity.

Paul encourages the believers to put on the whole armor of God. He lists the literal parts of armor but links them to the real tenets and behavior that a follower of Jesus should take to a fight. Among the things Paul lists -- the belt of truth, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Word of God.

The belt of truth

Sometimes we are not that keen on truth, even when we should be. And sometimes the truth is hard to find, even in the news. But for Paul, seeking the truth and standing for the truth are key to fighting the good fight. He says “Put on the belt of truth.”

The gospel stories are full of moments when Jesus engenders the wrath of the powerful because he tells the truth. You might even say that the real reason Jesus ended up on a cross is because he would not stand for anything less than the truth.

What is true? What is the truth to which we, as followers of Jesus, must bear witness? The truth is –

- We are called to love our neighbor as ourselves
- The meek shall inherit the earth and the merciful will receive mercy
- Those who are outcasts are the people Jesus was especially interested in
- Unless you are without sin, you shouldn't throw stones.

We may disagree about what policies should be in place to respond to the political issues of our day. We may vehemently disagree with each other's perspectives. But we as followers of Jesus we must wear the belt of truth. We must stand for the truth that Jesus taught. We can get to answers in different ways, we can even support different answers -- but we cannot compromise the truth.

Jesus clearly shows us the truth through his life and teaching. The truth of the gospel is not unclear in any way. The challenge is in applying that truth, not in knowing what it is. And that challenge is one we must embrace.

Following Jesus is not just a religious matter. Jesus was fully involved in his earthly life and he was constantly speaking to the realities of the world he lived in. And so the truths that he embodied were not meant for the spiritual fight against principalities and powers, they were meant for the fight for right and for the

vulnerable and for the sacredness of all people in this life. We must wear the belt of truth.

The helmet of salvation

When a soldier in Paul's day suited up for battle, the helmet was the last piece of the armament to be put in place. In fact, without the helmet, a soldier would be so vulnerable that the rest of the armor would be of little use. Paul says to the Ephesians, "Put on the helmet of salvation"

We are saved by no act of ourselves. In fact, we are saved in spite of ourselves. Salvation is ours not because of who we are but because of who God is. So to put on the helmet of salvation may simply mean to enter into our fights remembering whose we are. We have been redeemed. We belong to God.

We may identify as a Democrat or a Republican, as a conservative or a liberal. We may be pro-Trump or never Trump. But all of those characterizations are minor compared to our primary identity, which is that we are people who have been saved. We belong to the Lord.

What have we been saved from? If we were talking about spiritual warfare, I suppose we would say we have been saved from the dark abyss. But if we are talking about life now, I wonder what we would say we have been saved from. If I am wearing the helmet of salvation – if I am living clearly displaying that I belong to the Lord – what have I left behind?

- We are saved from hatred
- We are saved from pettiness
- We are saved from greed
- We are saved from self-righteousness

We are saved from those darker aspects of ourselves and we must act as though we are. To wear the helmet of salvation means that in my conversations I show up as someone who may disagree with you, but as someone who is obviously living in gratitude to the God to whom I belong. It's not that we don't slip up – we are being saved day by day. But it is that when we talk or act with hatred or

pettiness or greed or self-righteousness – it is a slip for which we are sorry, not a posture from which we engage. We must wear the helmet of salvation.

The Word of God

One of the phrases the President likes to use is “fake news.” Turns out that fake news is really a thing rather than some phrase he made up. It is defined as “propaganda that consists of deliberate misinformation.” Throughout history there are many documented incidents of fake news, including as far back as the 13th century BC when Ramses the Great spread lies and propaganda portraying the [Battle of Kadesh](#) as a stunning victory for the Egyptians when, in fact, the treaty reveals that the battle was actually a [stalemate](#).

Trying to figure out what is fake and what is not, is not that easy. Social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter are challenged by it. So are we. And it doesn't help that we all tend to listen to the news that supports our point of view.

For Paul, the sword that pierces fake news is the Word of God. Again, like the truth, we must go back to what Jesus said, what he taught, and where he seemed to place his priorities. This should be the grounding for our thinking and debate as Christians. There may be many ways to solve a problem, but God's Word and the example of Jesus should be guiding our evaluation of possible solutions.

What does the New Testament say about economics? What does the New Testament say about war? What does the New Testament say about strangers in our land? What does the New Testament say about how we handle disagreements or times when we are offended? We must solve the problems of our day, to be sure. But we must solve them guided by something that is a firmer foundation than the views of politicians or even our favorite news show.

In our thinking and in our conversations, we must be anchored to the New Testament, to the teachings of Jesus, to the witness of those who lived and died following their faith. Our sword is the Word of God.

Conclusion

The political realities we are mired in look like they will last quite a while longer – likely far beyond even 2020. And amidst the noise of it all, there are fights going on about ideas and policies that are deeply important. So what is a Christian to do? How do we engage in this important national debate in a way that is true to our calling and true to our Lord?

Paul says;

- We must be strongly aligned with the truths of the gospel as we understand it – the truths of love and acceptance and mercy.
- We must remember whose we are – we are a people who have been saved, who have experienced grace we did not deserve, and we live in gratitude.
- We must be grounded in the Word of God –it is the knowledge of what Jesus taught, in both word and deed, that anchors us and leads us to what is real.

Paul says be strong in the Lord. This is, indeed, good advice for today.