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“Finding Strength”

Ephesians 6:10-20 | *Read the scripture online, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=213080448>*

If the commercials of my childhood had a lesson to offer, it was clear that strength came from a bowl of Wheaties, a Flintstone vitamin, and a soak in a Calgon bath at the end of a long day. In a post-9/11 world, we see—more than ever—that strength is treated as a commodity, marketed in self-help books, protein shakes, and the latest fitness craze. Strength, we are told, comes when we quickly say: “Like a good neighbor State Farm is there” in the face of a crisis, when we check our credit report score on FreeCreditReport.com and when we take our Boniva to ensure bone health. And while fitness, supplements, and insurance are all necessary supports in this culture, we are taught that strength is something that can be bought and sold, and that with the right products we can rest assured of our physical, financial, emotional, national strength.

We all have our formulas of assembled touchstones that reinforce our sense of well-being when life wears us down. A call to a high school friend, a jog around the reservoir, a go-to movie that makes us laugh, a warm bowl of soup. Elizabeth Gilbert writes: “I have a friend whose grandmother used to tell her, “There’s no trouble in this world so serious that it can’t be cured with a hot bath, a glass of whiskey, and the Book of Common Prayer.”¹

We all know what the marketing teams know: There are moments of stress or loss when the well of our internal resources simply don’t feel like enough to sustain us, when we need to find strength from an external source: from God or a spouse or a cup of coffee, rallying to ourselves the support we need to face the struggle ahead with courage and love. And somehow, in a stroke of sheer grace, we find the strength to spend one more day at a hospital bedside; to pound the pavement and apply for more jobs. We find the strength to face a transition or stand up for ourselves; we find the strength to care for another or to simply live each day after losing a loved one.

Eve Ensler tells the story about Agnes, who built a safe house in Massai land, Africa, for girls who needed to escape the threat of genital mutilation. She tells the story of Jacquelyn, a 14 year old girl who heard her father negotiating with an old man where her father would trade Jacquelyn for some cows, a precious commodity in drought-ridden Africa. She knew she would be cut and would forced to be this man’s wife, so she ran to the safe house, traveling for two days through Massai land where she slept with hyenas and hid from the elements until she arrived in safety. Here she was protected, and received an education. After a year she was reunited with her family. Her father, seeing her poise and strength, wept when he saw her, promised that he would protect her and her sisters from the harm of mutilation. But the amazing part of this story is not what her father said, but Jacquelyn’s response to her father: “You were willing to sell me for four cows and a calf and some blankets, but I will promise you now that I am educated I will always take care of you and I will come back and build you a house, and I will be your daughter for the rest of your life.”²



Enslar credits Jacquelyn's strength to what she calls "the girl cell." She says: "The girl cell is compassion, empathy, passionate self, vulnerability, openness, intensity, association, relationship, intuitive...(and we find) that compassion informs wisdom; vulnerability is our greatest strength and emotions have inherent logic which leads to radical, appropriate, saving action."³

We can name the struggles of our lives, we can notice the internal and external supports that give us hope, but the question of our Biblical writer this morning is this: *What is the source of your strength? What is the source of our strength?*

Our scripture for this morning tells the story of a growing church in a threatening time, who were, quite frankly, in need of strength. This letter, although addressed to the Ephesians, is understood to be a pastoral letter circulated throughout the churches in Asia minor. It was a letter to encourage the church to be church in the face of Roman occupation, competing philosophies, and the moral temptations all around them. Throughout, the writer of Ephesians points to a powerful, loving God, who strengthens the church through Christ. Christ, he writes, is the source of the church's unity as well as the church's exaltation to glory. Through Christ, the church can do the impossible, be the unheard of. Through Christ the church finds purpose, finds hope, and finds its strength.

In our passage for this morning, taken from the final chapter of this letter, the author utilizes an image of worldly power—the armor of a Roman soldier—and re-imagines it as a symbol not infused with threat but infused instead with the power of love. While at first the militaristic imagery may be off-putting to some, it is clear that the author of this letter is putting a divine twist to a worldly symbol: detracting the worldly significance of this image and replacing it with the potential for amazing divine grace.

The author of Ephesians knows that the world is full of challenges. He knows that there are pressures and limitations that pull on each person, commanding our attention with the wiles of television and Internet ads. He knows that there are people and movements and behaviors that would love to define our lives if we let them; that there are people who claim to know us better than we know ourselves, and who propose that they will offer what is best for us. There are attitudes that drive our culture that often go unnoticed until we find ourselves one day projecting an attitude we don't like: one of greed, consumerism, individualism. There are pleasures we are told that we can buy without considering the expense. There are segregating forces that keep us with "our own kind" and make it all too easy to turn a blind eye to the needs of others. There are those who garner their power by forcibly taking power from others, and there are ways in which we are complicit in this damaging power-play that we don't even notice. It can be hard to be a person in the world, yesterday and today.

But the writer of our letter offers hope. He points us to resources at our fingertips, spiritual resources that can give us the strength we need for the journey ahead, and the strength we need to make a holy difference in the world. He writes about this armor:

- The belt of truth, a sign of preparedness;
- The breastplate of righteousness, a symbol taken from prophetic literature to call us to transforming justice;



- Shoes of readiness, the tools we need to never cease in our walk in the way of peace;
- The Shield of faith, protection from attack;
- The Helmet of salvation, a symbol of God's desire to free God's people from the bondage of sin and brokenness and death;
- The Sword of the Spirit, the only weapon of this armor, which is, we learn, the word of God.

All of this armor is blanketed in prayer.

Strength is found in faith and justice and peace, in salvation and Spirit and prayer. Power is not something won through worldly pursuits, but real strength is grounded in the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Joan Chittester writes:

We have become a society of machines and business degrees, of stocks and bonds, of world power and world devastation, of what works and what makes money. We train our young to get ahead, our middle-aged to consumer, and our elderly to be silent...We talk about ideas for getting ahead rather than about our ideas for touching God. We are miles from our roots and light-years away from our upbringings. We have abandoned the concerns of the civilizations before us. We have forsaken the good, the true, and the beautiful for the effective, the powerful and the opulent...And we are lost.

So what do I believe in? What do I define as human?...To be human it is necessary to think again about what matters in life, to ask always why what it is to be human is to listen to the rest of the world with a tender heart and learn to live life with our arms open and our souls seared with a sense of responsibility for everything that is.⁴

Chittester reminds us of the truth that is the twist for our passage today, that to be human implies an initiative of openness to the direction of the Spirit and a willingness to partner with God in God's life-giving mission.

The author of Ephesians uses this imagery of armor to remind us that the equipment we need for the journey, for the strength of our selves, of the church, of the world is offered to us, freely and graciously. But we must pick up the armor and put it on. We must dress ourselves in this armor with intention and hope. We must receive the power God offers to the church, and be strengthened to use this power for God's redemptive purposes.

God empowers the church. God empowers us, but we must take the initiative to receive that power, to receive the gift that has been given to us and to adorn ourselves – to identify ourselves – in faith and justice and peace and salvation and Spirit and prayer.

More than 20 years ago, I experienced what felt like a crossroads in my life, filled with the identity and relational turmoil that often mark teenage experience. On a whim I opened a bible given to me by my youth leader, flipping to a passage for guidance and strength, and I think, to see if God was listening. The passage to which I opened was the passage for today, and in a moment of grace I realized that I was held in the arms of a God who loves me – and that I would never leave this grasp.



May we live this day with the knowledge of the strength we receive from the presence and power of a loving God, who will never leave nor forsake us. May we clothe ourselves in the qualities of the armor of God, in faith, and justice and peace and salvation and Spirit and prayer. May we, as individuals and as a church, find the strength ...

to tell the truth,
to be humble,
to seek forgiveness,
to change what is wrong,
to face every struggle with hope,
to courageously speak up on behalf of the needs of others,
to live in peace.

Amen.

¹ Gilbert, Elizabeth. *Eat, Pray, Love*. Viking, 2006, p. 154.

² Eve Ensler, TEDtalks India, November 2009

³ Ibid

⁴ Chittister, Joan. *What Does It Mean to Be Human?: Reverence for Life Reaffirmed by Responses from Around the World*. Compiled and edited by Frederick Franck, Richard Connolly, Janis Roze. St. Martin, 2001, p. 149.

