

August 23, 2015
TEXT: Ephesians 6:10–20
TITLE: Finding Strength

Video game designer Jane McGonigal found herself bedridden for three months after suffering a concussion that didn't heal properly. A month after her initial injury she was still experiencing headaches, memory loss, dizziness and brain fog, so her doctor told her that the only way to heal was to rest her brain. This meant: no reading, no screens, no caffeine, no exercise. As the weeks turned to months, her brain started to tell her that she had nothing left to live for. Jane knew that she had to do something to pull herself out from under the current of depression and give herself a reason to live.

Jane remembered studies that highlighted the positive health effects of playing video games. Among others, she cites a study from East Carolina University that says that 30 minutes of playing on line games can outperform pharmaceuticals in treating anxiety and depression. And so she used her expertise of video games as a source of strength for her own path. She says: "When we play a game we tackle tough challenges with more creativity, more determination, and more optimism and we're more likely to reach out to others for help...so (she) created a game "Jane the Concussion Slayer."

Jane reached out to her twin sister, then her husband – and together they identified and battled the "bad guys": bright lights, crowded places. Together they collected "power ups" – things that could help her to "feel a little bit good or productive, ...things like cuddling her dog or a walk around the block". Within days, although her concussion symptoms remained, her depression lifted. She was more resilient, more optimistic, and felt more connected to others.¹

Whether healing from an injury, a wounded relationship or a profound loss we have all had times in our life where we have needed to find strength. Think for a moment about the unexpected places to which you have turned when strength was in a short supply. I have found strength in a slice of apple pie, shedding tears, alliances with my sisters, the support of my husband, talking it out, singing, playing with my niece and nephews, jumping jacks, and—for a brief time in college—asking to be called Zelda.

And I have found strength in scripture.

The first time I spoke on this text, I was 18 years old, and was sharing my testimony to my high school youth group as a member of the graduating class. I told the story of a pivotal moment in my faith life, when I had a difficult decision to make as a High School Junior. Yes, the decision involved a boy; it involved making someone I had loved unhappy in order to do what was right for me. I had

¹ Jane McGonigal, TED Talks: *Finding Strength in Unexpected Places: Video Games*.

talked to my parents and my friends, and even a therapist. I wrote out a script. But I was still a mess. So I started to pray. I asked God to help me, and randomly opened a Bible I had just received to see if there was a word for me. There it was: “Stand firm, so that when the day of evil comes, you will be able to stand your ground, and after everything, remain standing.”

I found strength in this affirmation from scripture, and did what I needed to do. And I started to think that the Bible might have something to say to me directly, and that Jesus was someone who I could get to know better.

Now, although the Spirit can use these passages to touch us on a personal level, Paul was not writing to 16 year- old heart-sick girls when he penned this letter to the church in Ephesus. In fact, he wasn’t writing to an individual at all, but to a community. Our scripture for this morning addresses a growing church in a threatening time. This letter, although addressed to the Ephesians, is understood to be a pastoral letter circulated throughout the churches in Asia minor—a letter to encourage the church to be church in the face of Roman occupation, competing philosophies, and moral temptations all around them. Throughout the letter, 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 finds purpose, finds hope, and finds its strength.

And so we get to our text for today, in which the author uses imagery of the “warrior garb of Roman soldiers who upheld an oppressive, totalitarian regime”² as a metaphor for how the church might draw near to Christ.

We must note, however, that the author of this text is not advocating that the church build bunkers and stockpile weapons. Rather, he is co-opting the militaristic imagery of the armor and re-imagining it in light of the Gospel of peace. Instruments of defense and force are stripped of their power and infused with new meaning.

- The belt used to hold up a soldier’s toga so that he might move freely, becomes the belt of truth “leaving the church free and flexible, able to walk or run, loosed from what constrains or trips the wearer.”³
- The breastplate of righteous protects the core of the wearer, covering his heart.
- Shoes allow the believer to travel far and wide and spread to participate in God’s mission and spread a message of peace.
- The shield of faith protects from attacks of every kind.

² Ww.workingpreacher.org/preaching.asp?commentary_id=1380

³ *ibid*

- The helmet of salvation a symbol of God's desire to free God's people from the bondage of sin and brokenness and death.
- Shield of the word of God—the only offensive weapon is to speak God's word.

Too often we—as individuals and as communities—choose to find strength in force, in privilege, and in assertions of our own power and authority. If we're honest, we would admit that we have learned many these tactics by elementary school—where popular kids are often named for their looks, wealth, and athleticism rather than for their compassion and wisdom. We see this strength-finding through name-calling, bullying and cliques, through wage-gaps in the workplace, through disproportionality in the criminal justice system. We see this strength finding in “stand your ground” defenses and through arguments that government employees should not be required to issue marriage licenses to same sex couples on religious grounds even though federal law extends all loving couples this right.

And so Paul speaks to the church today, still, reminding us that as the people of God we are called to be different. We need to take our cues from Christ, rather than culture. We are to clothe ourselves with qualities that define who we are and whose we are—attire that sets us apart not for power but for service; an armor that defends us against the distortions of the world around us and frees us to declare the goodness and love of God.

Although this armor is not made of metal and leather, we can see it all around:

This is the outfit of those bold enough to say that “black lives matter,” even though that means naming the uncomfortable truth of systemic oppression caused by white supremacy.

- This is the outfit of those chose what is unpopular because they know it is right: those who will challenge a bully, welcome the outcast, offer what they've got to care for the needs of another.
- This is the outfit of those who have marched on streets in Washington DC, Selma, Alabama, and Pittsburgh PA to say that any laws that claim that another person is “less than” another—because of the color of their skin, their gender, their ethnicity, or their sexual identity—are outright wrong.
- This is the outfit of those who remain peaceful in the face of violence, who sing hymns in the face of verbal attacks, who persevere in their pursuit of justice when others stand in their way. This is the outfit of those who choose to love in the face of hate.

- This is the outfit of those who insist that God's salvation has been won for all—regardless of race, class, gender, sexual identity, ethnicity or ability.
- This is the outfit of those who insist that the word of God proclaims redemption for all, and invites others to know the new life that is extended to all through Jesus Christ.

This is the outfit hand-sewn for God's church, a unified people called to proclaim, in word and in deed, a gospel of gracious love. Let us hear this reminder, trusting that our strength is not to be found through the power systems of the world, but rather in our collective pursuit of truth, righteous justice, faith, peace and love.

Author Anna Quintlen writes: "Acts of bravery don't always take place on battlefields. They can take place in your heart, when you have the courage to honor your character, your intellect, your inclinations, and yes, your soul by listening to its clean, clear voice of direction instead of following the muddied messages of a timid world."

May we find strength as a community together, and boldly proclaim the gospel of peace. May we step forth in courage, assured that the source of our strength is Jesus Christ, whose love for us is so strong that, in fact, it redeemed the world.

Thanks be to God! Amen.