

August 26, 2018 (10:00 am

TEXT: Ephesians 6:10–20

TITLE: Standing Firm

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

Why in the world would the apostle Paul use the imagery of a Roman's soldier uniform to impress upon the Christian community the need to be faithful, to stand strong; to not waver? Perhaps, Paul used images that were familiar to his audience, as well as himself. They were living in a Roman empire, where Christianity was illegal, Christians were persecuted, taken into custody and could be killed. While imprisoned for his unwavering witness, Paul spent a lot of time looking at Roman soldiers uniforms. I'm sure as he contemplated his plight of being in the custody of the state, a prisoner for the Lord, and a witness to Christ's and his resurrection. I'm sure Paul realized that what the enemy meant for harm, God meant for good and to further the message of good news.

In the chapters preceding today's passage, Paul spent the better part of his letter to the Ephesians instructing them on how to walk in the world as Christians. No longer Pagans, they were to turn from all the ways that were not pleasing to God and to become new creations, transformed, and ready to stand firm on and for what they believed.

Paul's use of military attire to describe how followers of Christ were to present themselves was not an accident. His very first sentence set the tone for how Christians then, and now are to stand as proverbial, committed, soldiers in the army of God—strong in the Lord and in the strength of God's power, not our own, Paul instructs: "put on the whole armor of God" to be prepared for the struggle against any and everything in life that is not of God. Paul was not instructing people to prepare for an actual war, or to be so heavenly focused that they were no earthly good, but to be prepared to stand firm on that which was of God, righteous, just, gracious and merciful.

Yesterday, this country lost a man, a soldier and patriot, who was willing to stand firm on that which he believed. John McCain, a man who served his country in the military. We've heard that rather than returning home after being captured, McCain remained with his fellow prisoners, not accepting early release as POW. In congress, McCain voted his conscience rather than towing the party line. He was willing to listen, to reason with and be persuaded by others. He voted for, rather than against affordable health care, corrected his supporters when they sought to denigrate his political opponents and died with dignity. He garnered the respect and love of people on both sides of the aisle in congress—he lived as a soldier and died as a soldier, a man of honor committed to his country, family and humanity.

That's what Paul meant when he said to the Ephesians to stand firm, not to conform to what is popular or conventional, do not give in to whims, or to be so rigid or resolute that we can't hear, reason or be willing to change our position. It is an unwise and diminutive person who thinks or believes they have all the answers and have an insatiable need to be the smartest person in the room all the time.

At this point, most sermons on this passage will describe and decipher the whole or as one commentator translated it, “the splendid armor” of God. Paul instructs: “fasten the belt of truth around our waist, and put on the breast plate of righteousness; put on our feet whatever makes us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace, to take the shield of faith to quench all the flaming arrows; take the helmet of salvation and sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.”

Paul’s imperative to pray in the Spirit at all times is where I want to spend some time. James 5:16b boldly proclaims: “the fervent, effectual prayers of the righteous avails much,” and Philippians 4:6 cautions us: “be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.” Our most effective, offensive weapon as the people of God is fervent, effectual, never ceasing prayer. We are to pray in season and out of season; pray when it’s popular and unpopular; pray when situations and circumstances are hopeless, and when we are hopeful. And while we are praying, we are called to keep alert, to pray for one another and for those who are working against the promises and precepts of God.

Standing firm, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on the principle of nonviolence, praying for the defeat of the evil power of racism and that one day his children and all people might be judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin. Nelson Mandela imprisoned for 27 years, never losing hope, prayed that the evil power of apartheid would one day come to pass and his beloved country of South Africa would be one in which all people were treated equally and equitable. Barth and Bonhoeffer risking lives, their spoke against and prayed that the powers and principalities of beastly Nazism would be defeated and that Jews would be free to live their lives without fear. Mother Teresa sometimes losing hope and in anger, prayed resolutely that God would shine light on the darkness of the forgotten people living in poverty and disease.

As the people of God we realize there are many wrongs that can only be made right as we stand firm in the power of God and pray. We pray that the evil clutches of addiction, abuse, poverty, human trafficking and disenfranchisement might be defeated. We pray that the cosmic powers of this present darkness turn to the marvelous light and that all of God’s people be treated with dignity, respect and justly. We pray that the spiritual forces of evil feeding and fueling the unbridled partisanship, nationalistic, violence that has taken hold in this country and government will come to an end.

Lord, we pray that when “they,” whoever they may be, go low that we don’t strike harder, but that we seek to go higher by getting on our knees and praying harder. And we pray that wicked rulers and authorities who are creating divisions among people based on their race, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity, country of origin, or any other defining factor will be defeated. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians:

We beg you, brothers and sisters, do not be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter...Let no one deceive you in any way...the coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all

power, signs, lying wonders and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false... *but* brothers and sisters, *you* stand firm and hold fast ... (2 Thessalonians 2:1b, 3a, 9, 11, 12, 15a)

Beloved, Paul affirmed, we can only stand firm and hold fast by standing in God's strength and praying in the Spirit for one another at all times. We are in a relationship of mutuality. As we affirmed in the baptism of Francesca Joy, Ephesians (4:4–6) confirms: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

May we always realize, as the body of Christ we are only as strong as the weakest; we are only as free as the one who is imprisoned; we are only able to move forward as the one who has been left behind. Jesus' resurrection has already secured our eternal life, but in the meantime we are to live this earthly life standing firm in our faith, a faith that is not transient, but transcendent, transformative and renewing; a faith that is not stubborn, but assured, sometime uncertain, but always seeking certainty; a faith that does not destroy, but nurtures and grows richer day by day, standing firm on the power and promises of God. Amen.