



St. Luke's Episcopal Church
Spirituality in Action

Monday, June 1, 2020

Dear People of St. Luke's,

The Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

I recently read a speculation that in the future school children will groan at the length of the chapter in their American History textbooks on the year 2020. A global pandemic, environmental degradation, economic distress, and racial protests across our nation have many of us feeling angry, sad, worried, and powerless.

Much of the anxiety we feel is because the challenges we face-viral and racial, environmental and economic-are rooted in historical patterns and social structures. These days would be easier for us if we could blame a particular person, group, or nation for our problems. The strengths and weaknesses of how we deliver healthcare, however, cannot be attributed to a particular person or group. The horrific killings of EMT Breonna Taylor (asleep in her bed), Ahmaud Arbery (while jogging), and George Floyd (after grocery shopping), raise the complex issues of race in America. Their deaths remind us of the deadly injustice involved in blaming any group or race as the source of trouble. Scapegoating is not the answer and oversimplification solves nothing.

The situation reminds me of Ephesians 6:10-12, where we read,

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.

The first word which stands out to me in this text is “wiles,” which is a translation of the Greek feminine noun *methodeia*, from which we get our word “method.” The methods of the devil, the methods of evil, are definitely wiley and, indeed, the Greek noun can carry with it connotations of craftiness, deceit, and scheming. Patterns of evil which shape unjust social structures are decidedly wiley.

Evil is systemic and intentional, but often uses chaos to obscure its influence. The enormity of the challenges we face and the presence of chaos saps our strength and discourages action. No wonder we feel tired. The struggle is against things bigger than individuals, hence the use in our verses of big terms like rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, and spiritual forces. It is against these that our scriptures and our times ask us to stand.

Our text from Ephesians advises us, “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” (6:13). This fascinating directive, quite counterintuitively, asks us to put on armor not to fight, but to stand firm. Few of us will ever have the opportunity to create national or global solutions. That said, we can all stand firm. In so doing, we help solutions arise and facilitate the work of gifted problem solvers.

Throughout the text runs the idea of strength. It takes strength to stand firm in days like ours. Thus, job one for spiritual people is to pray for strength. Pray for God’s strength for yourself and for others. Pray for strength for our leaders—the ones you like and the ones you don’t. Ask God’s strength for climate scientists, civil servants, social justice advocates, and healthcare workers. We make more mistakes and are more vulnerable to evil influences when we are weakened, so pray for strength.

Ephesians 6:13-18 contains further helpful advice. We read,

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.

Difficult times are full of chaos and confusion. This is why truth is so important. It clears the fog of evil unconsciousness which prevents clear thinking and right action. The truth is that physical distancing is crucial for combatting the current pandemic. We are fastening the belt of truth when we put on our masks. The truth is that racism remains a significant evil in our nation. When we learn about racial history and racist dynamics we are fastening the belt of truth. When we speak up and act in behalf of respect and equality, we are fastening the belt of truth.

Righteousness is that which is deemed right and just by our God. To put on the breastplate of righteousness is to put our spirituality in action. The work we do as individuals and as a parish on behalf of those in need, and the work we do in advocacy for a better society is putting on the breastplate of righteousness. For example, we will likely not be the ones to solve our world’s problems of climate and environmental degradation. But in doing our part by reducing, reusing, and recycling, we help to create a national atmosphere (pun definitely intended) of care and concern for our world. That’s an example of putting on the breastplate of righteousness and standing firm.

With our faith to shield us from becoming disheartened, we continue to pray for strength and do our part, no matter how small. With the mindset (helmet) of salvation, using spiritual discernment (the sword of the Spirit), guided by our scriptures and the wisdom of our ancestors, we stand firm. We continue to name environment, healthcare, and race as significant issues, neither ignoring nor dismissing them. In fact, I believe that praying daily for God’s help and guidance in the areas of environment, healthcare, and race is an important part of standing firm in our present era. We live and pray our way through these difficult times, proclaiming the gospel of peace.

Yours in Christ,
Randall Warren, Rector