



Texts in Context

Putting on the Whole Armor of God: Preaching Ephesians 6:10–20 in a Multicultural Congregation

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¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For 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. ¹³Therefore 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. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸Pray 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. ¹⁹Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Ephesians 6:10–20

The tensions and struggles present both in the world and in our congregations—perhaps especially in our multicultural and immigrant congregations—require us to put on the whole armor of God for our protection, our survival, and our thriving.

Following Jesus is not easy. At times one needs discipline. At other times one needs to roll with the chaos (after all, God did once create out of chaos and maybe God will do it again). There are times when one might think that others are out to get them; and sometimes others actually *are* out to get them. In the midst of the opposing forces or tensions in this world, how do we live as followers of Jesus?

Following Jesus is not easy. Now add to this difficulty the fact that there are many people who seek to follow Jesus in cultures other than the one in which they were born and raised. This applies not only to missionaries who follow Jesus to serve in other cultures, but also to the immigrants or refugees who may or may not see their move from their home to a new land as following Jesus. They may be doing it merely for survival, for political ideals, or because they are following family members. But now, in a new land, Christian immigrants must learn what it means to follow Jesus.

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Following Jesus is not easy. Now add the new immigrant or refugee to a congregation where most of the people have been settled in this culture for three or more generations. More specifically, add young-to-middle-age West African immigrants to an urban congregation of mostly elderly people of Scandinavian heritage and you have the context in which I served as an interim pastor for a year. Half of the congregational members were West African immigrants,¹ the other half European Americans—with a few African Americans in the mix. This is the context for my reflections in this article.

IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Life in the United States of America for the new immigrant or refugee is not easy. Many of the immigrants struggle to find jobs. When they do find employment, many must work evenings or nights and weekends. Many are working and going to school while raising a family. Many of the West African immigrants are sending money back to Africa to support family members. (West Africans have a broad definition of family, including *any* blood relations—aunts, uncles, cousins—and close friends, who become mother, father, sister, brother, aunts, uncles, or cousins.) One West African member shared with me the bind this creates for the immigrants. He explained that family members in Africa think their relative living in the United States is wealthy, so they expect money. Some keep asking for more and more money. This image of wealth is not helped, he said, by some people who return to Africa and spend lots of money to impress their family. The new immigrants feel guilt or are shamed by family back in Africa if they fail to satisfy the

¹Specifically the West African countries of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria.

request for money. The family tie (or bind) to Africa is very strong. Many family members in Africa do not understand the struggles of their immigrant family members in the United States.

Even though life is not easy in the United States for the new immigrant, many have shown great resiliency and succeeded against the odds. Mary Pipher is a psychologist who works with the refugee community in Lincoln, Nebraska. She has discovered twelve traits (or “attributes of resilience”), in her work with refugees, that contribute to success in America:²

- future orientation
- energy and good health
- the ability to pay attention
- ambition and initiative
- verbal expressiveness
- positive mental health
- the ability to calm down
- flexibility
- intentionality
- lovability
- the ability to love new people
- good moral character

Pipher states that none of the refugees had all of these traits, but the people who had many of them did better than the people who had a few or none. However, according to Pipher, “to really succeed in America, refugees must learn to deal with Americans. The best way is to somehow hold on to the good from the old culture while taking advantage of the new, which is much more difficult in practice than in theory.”³ Therefore, even if the immigrant or refugee has many of these traits of resiliency, it still takes additional work for the person to hold the two cultures in tension and succeed in the United States.

IMMIGRANTS IN THE CONGREGATION

Following Jesus in a multicultural congregation is not easy. Which culture will the congregation follow? Which traditions will the congregation keep? What new traditions will emerge? Nancy Ammerman states that each congregation has a culture of its own—a way of acting, speaking, and socializing new members. Congregations tend toward homogeneity. “People simply do not expect a congregation to be ethnically or economically diverse, and the practice of choosing a congregation (rather than being assigned to one) increases that homogeneity.”⁴ Serving in a

²Mary Bray Pipher, *The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community* (New York: Harcourt, 2002). The traits are found on pp. 69–70, then later she calls these traits “attributes of resilience” on pp. 286–292.

³Ibid., 71.

⁴Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1997) 56.

congregation is not easy, but at least in a homogeneous congregation people speak the same language, have the same traditions, and understand the same jokes. However, if half of the congregation has a different language, different traditions, and different jokes, the challenge for preaching grows. To generalize Lutherans as stoic and afraid-to-talk-about-faith Scandinavians misses the mark for West African Lutherans, who can be gregarious and share freely about faith in Jesus.

Tension is created in this multicultural setting. Some might argue that, because the immigrants came to this congregation, the congregation should not change for them, saying: “Immigrants need to get used to being in the United States and this is how we do church here.” Some go the other way, as did the immigrant churches of old, to create the congregation to be like it was back home, keeping the old language and traditions in worship and becoming a place set apart from the new culture. The most difficult thing to do is to create a new congregational culture from the different cultures and traditions of people in the congregation. Herein lies the tension: listening to the stories of the new immigrants *and* listening to the stories of the old immigrants or the natives of the culture in which you are serving, holding on to both and creating something new.

Stephanie Spellers lays out a continuum of three types of congregations: the inviting congregation, the inclusive congregation, and the radically welcoming congregation.⁵

The message of the inviting congregation, says Speller, is, “Come, join our community and share our cultural values and heritage.” The goal of the congregation is *assimilation*, where the community invites new people to enter and adopt the dominant identity.

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The message of the inclusive congregation is, “Help us to be diverse.” The goal is *incorporation*, where the community welcomes marginalized groups, but no true shift occurs in the congregation’s cultural identity and practices.

The message of the radically welcoming congregation is, “Bring your culture, your voice, your whole self—we want to engage in truly mutual relationship.” The goal is *incarnation*, where the community embodies and expresses the full range of voices and gifts of the people present, including the other. Spellers argues for congregations to be radically welcoming, but this is not easy. In order to be radically welcoming, a congregation needs to address power issues and face a variety of fears. But most important, a congregation needs to be intentional about all this. In other words, it is not easy, and it takes work. How might one be clothed for that work?

⁵Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, the Other, and the Spirit of Transformation* (New York: Church Publishing, 2006) 64.

PREACHING EPHESIANS 6:10–20 IN CONTEXT

This passage in Eph 6:10–20 may be interpreted by congregational members as what a person needs to live outside the congregation. That is, to live “in the world” people need the whole armor of God to protect them from the evils in the world. However, when people within the congregation become unwelcoming, or even hostile, it is important to be clothed properly to face the “evil forces” and still proclaim Christ *within* a congregation. In the context of a multicultural congregation, I believe it needs to be read both ways. There are evil forces in the world that attack not only immigrants but also established citizens and people who are marginalized in any country: racism, sexism, classism, ageism, (put your own -ism here). However, “evil forces” can attack the congregation from within also: the same kinds of racism, sexism, classism, ageism—plus traditionalism. Traditionalism, in this sense, is holding on to tradition “because we have always done it this way,” and not being open to anything new.

Therefore, as followers of Jesus, within and without the congregation, we need to put on the whole armor of God. The Greek word here is πανοπλία (all/whole armor), which suggests that all the pieces need to be in place. Roman soldiers were a common sight when Ephesians was written, so the author uses the armor and clothing of a Roman soldier to point out how a Christian might be similarly clothed for battle against evil forces. There are six pieces of the Roman soldier’s armor, but Ephesians adds a seventh piece to make up the whole armor of God.

*it is only possible to have victory if Jesus continually works
in, with, and through us*

This passage begins with a command to focus on the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 6:10). The present passive imperative form of ἐνδυναμῶ (empower) could read something like this, “Finally, continually become empowered in the Lord and in the strength of his might.” It is only possible to have victory if Jesus continually works in, with, and through us. If we try it to do this on our own strength, it will not work. It takes courage to stand together with people who may not be exactly like us. It takes courage to be part of a congregation in a culture that is different from one’s own. It takes courage for some of the long-term members of the congregation to see the congregation change. Elderly members may not understand the culture or the accents of the immigrant members (and hearing aids only muddle the speech more), and West African (or other) immigrants may not understand how a congregation operates in the United States, but knowing the strength of Jesus, all will have the courage to stand.

Belt of truth (Eph 6:14). Roman soldiers wore a belt to hold up their toga so they could run and not trip. The truth of God keeps us from tumbling into error. God’s truth is deeper than our experience of this life. We experience a world full of economic chaos and political mayhem, but we confess the truth that Jesus Christ is

still Lord of the cosmos. To put on the belt of truth is to have the courage to stand on God's truth in the face the experience of life. After worship one Sunday, Suetta,⁶ a middle-aged West African member, asked me to pray for her. During the past week she had been suspended from work. As she described the incident leading to her suspension, it sounded like a cultural misunderstanding. "Pastor, I trust that the good Lord will work through this," Suetta said, "but pray, Pastor, pray that the truth will come out." I trusted God, but I was nervous about the trustworthiness of people. I had witnessed other experiences of cultural misunderstanding that didn't turn out well for the immigrant or refugee. I wasn't sure if truth would come out. But in this case it did. Suetta was reinstated and received an apology from her employer. Her belt of truth was wrapped around her tightly; mine was loosened by experiencing that much can go wrong in this world.

Breastplate of righteousness (Eph 6:14). The breastplate covers the vital organs. God's love protects the core of our being. We stand in our approval from God, because God is fond of us. Tormu, a young adult child of West African immigrants, was righteous in the eyes of his family. This righteousness was not based on God's righteousness, but he was a firstborn son and thus highly favored by the family. Tormu made a serious mistake and got into trouble with the law; however, he touted his own righteousness to the police and his family. After a long, grueling process, he was convicted in court. Though disappointed by their son, the family held on to the breastplate of Christ's righteousness. They know that even though Tormu made a bad choice, God still cares for him and will not forget about him in prison.

Shoes (Eph 6:15). The Roman Army wore shoes to fight, but Christians are to wear shoes to spread peace, says Ephesians. This unconventional use of the armor reminds us that God's ways are not our ways. How do we walk toward someone who is different from us, with thoughts of antagonism or with thoughts of peace? How do we enter a different culture, to conquer what is different or to engage in a peaceful conversation and to see what God might bring about?

Shield of faith (Eph 6:16). Roman shields were interlocking. Two-thirds of the shield would cover a soldier and one-third the person next to him. This made the Roman army nearly invincible, because there was no gap. Christians cannot stand alone against opposing forces; we need each other in order to live faithfully. A Christian community helps us stand strong. Faith knows that our worth is derived from the One to whom we belong, that God's love embraces us, sets us free to be truly ourselves, and helps us accept the people around us. Henry and Anna were longtime members of the congregation, second-generation Norwegian immigrants who had been active during the grand old days of the congregation in the 1950s and 1960s. Now in their mid-90s, they were still living in their own apartment and faithfully attending weekly worship. In recent years, Anna's memory and abilities were beginning to fade, and Henry slowly began assuming the duties of keeping a

⁶All names are pseudonyms.

home and taking care of his wife. One day, Henry announced to the congregation that he and Anna would celebrate their seventieth wedding anniversary the next day. At this announcement, the whole congregation burst into applause. The West African members wanted the congregation to celebrate this amazing feat with Henry and Anna, so they organized a congregational event. A few weeks later, we held a celebratory potluck luncheon after worship; the food represented the cultural makeup of the congregation (hamburger Tater-Tot hot dish next to a spicy African rice dish). Both Henry and Anna enjoyed the celebration, and two of their children were also in attendance. The West African members asked Henry to say a few words. Generally a quiet man, Henry shared many words that day; mostly he reminisced on the importance of the pastors and members of the congregation throughout their seventy years of life together. Kofi, a council member, asked the secret of their long marriage. Henry replied, "Have faith in your spouse, faith in yourself, and faith in God." The interlocking shields of faith are important for congregations and relationships.

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Helmet of salvation (Eph 6:17). The helmet covers the head and thinking. Remembering that Jesus died to save us protects us from those who want to lead us astray. When Martin Luther had encounters with the devil he is reported to have said, "I'm baptized." Wherever we are from, wherever we are, we cannot hear too much about our salvation through God's grace. The words "I have called you by name, you are mine" are powerful when your body has forsaken you and your mind is beginning to fail. The words "I will not leave you or forsake you" are powerful when the world around you is changing and people do not want you around. The words "you are my child" are powerful when you have lost family and home. To be reminded of God's grace encourages us when our thoughts may not be honorable, wholesome, or pure.

Sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:17). The sword is the word of God, the only offensive weapon mentioned in Ephesians' imagery. We are not to use weapons of metal but God's word, which tells of God's love through Jesus. This word of God can not only cut down our enemies, it can also cut to our hearts, convict us of our sin, and show us our unworthiness. Jesus used God's word as a sword to resist the devil (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). Peter wanted to use God's word as a sword to keep Gentiles away from the good news of Jesus Christ, but the sword cut the other way when God showed him in a vision (Acts 10:9–16) that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34–35). Do we use God's word to attack those who are different, or are we open to God's word working in us to show us something new?

Prayer (Eph 6:18). This is the seventh piece of equipment that Ephesians adds

to complete the whole armor of God: “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.” Prayer, for the follower of Jesus, ought to be like breathing, something done at all times with or without consciousness. Prayer is not an event that you go to and then leave. It is the way of being for a follower of Jesus. This continual conversation with God will help us to stand against whatever evils we face. The West African members brought to the congregation the tradition of a New Year’s Eve Tarry Service (also known simply as a “Watch”). The Tarry Service is an extended service (three or more hours) of prayer, singing, testimony, and preaching, to give God honor and praise, to lift up the old year to God’s hands, and to “pray in” the New Year for God’s purposes. Kokpor, the organizer of the service, stated that where he is from in Liberia it is common for a Terry Service to last all night for special times of prayer and praise to God, like Christmas or Pentecost. For those who are accustomed to giving an hour a week to worship God, the extended worship can be intimidating. However, after three hours of prayer, singing, testimony, and preaching, this becomes like breathing to the participant, and not just an event you go to and leave behind.

With these seven weapons of the Spirit, we are perfectly equipped for standing, no matter where we are. Following Jesus is not easy. It takes the whole armor of God to live together in the world and in Christian community. I believe that “the mystery of the gospel” of which Ephesians speaks (Eph 6:19) is that the Triune God works in us, through us, despite us, and beyond us to bring the good news of Jesus Christ for all people.

Preaching in a multicultural (West African immigrants, European Americans, and African Americans) urban context is not easy. One needs to listen to all the stories, be open to the commonalities, the differences, and the creative chaos as they come together or fall apart. In so doing one learns more about the Triune God who “is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph 3:20), through culture, chaos, and congregations. ⊕

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