

**“ARMED AND DANGEROUS”**  
**1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69**  
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**The Rev. Ryan Lambert**  
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There is that moment on the phone, that very brief pause when you know the person on the other end is quickly looking for your name on their computer screen. The particular call I am thinking of happened a few weeks ago, and when I picked up my office phone the person on the other end asked in a thick Southern drawl if he could speak to Pastor Lambert about a youth curriculum that could save the lives of our youth by teaching them “the truth about homosexuality, abortion, and other social ills.” I half-heartedly listened for a minute or so and then I extracted myself from the conversation with a polite, “No thanks, we are not interested.” And as I got off the phone, I put on a piece of armor to get ready for the battle with “those” Christians about what the Bible says.

While I was on vacation just a couple of weeks ago I ran into Spokane on a Sunday morning to pick up a gift and wrapping paper for the family birthday party we were having for Grace and her cousin that afternoon. As I wandered the aisles of Target that morning, it did feel slightly weird to be in Target at the time I am normally in worship with all of you; but it was also wonderful to be so completely removed from work, the computer, and the lectionary. And then as I walked outside I saw the signs and heard the people protesting. One sign read, “You should be in church!”; another read “God misses you!”; another, “Jesus died for you, why aren’t you in worship?” And so I put another piece of armor on, walked a little bit out of my way, and on the way to my car I asked them, rather smugly I must admit, “Why aren’t you in church?” As I walked those few extra steps, as my annoyance level built, I was sliding into more and more armor, making sure my shield was ready for the confrontation with “those” Christians.

Finally, just this week, Katherine Harris, a candidate for the United States Senate from Florida, was quoted as saying, “If you’re not electing Christians, then in essence you are going to legislate sin.” She further said, “Separation of church and state is a lie we have been told because God is the one who chooses our rulers.” I have read her quote over and over this week, often shaking my head in disbelief as I wonder why such statements are made and how someone could possibly think that God is somehow filling out that one great ballot, checking for hanging chads, and guiding our government like we are puppets. As I sneer at the next report about Ms. Harris’s statement, I fasten another piece of armor onto my body.

“Put on the whole armor of God...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.” And, so, I find myself constantly putting on the armor; and for all of my pacifist notions, for all of my peacemaker beliefs, I find myself ready to fight an intra-denominational battle for Christianity. And then I run full force into scripture lessons like the one we just heard from 1 Kings, in the Hebrew Scriptures, in what is commonly called the “Old (and some would think, outdated) Testament.” This passage from Kings tells of the dedication of Solomon’s temple that

made real the promises given by God to Solomon's father, King David. In this lesson Solomon is giving thanks for God's historic pattern of protection for the people Israel; and he is also seeking the promise that such protection and love will continue. Solomon's prayer is something like, "We celebrate and remember all that you have done for us, and it is going to continue happening, right God?" I suspect that if this prayer was from a 21st century child it would have included a "pretty please?"

And, thus, Solomon's prayer takes on a bit of a self-indulgent tone, but even this self-serving prayer is then redeemed in the final verses we read from 1 Kings. In these verses from Solomon's prayer, with its focus on the temple being a place where "all the peoples of the earth may know your name," suddenly the Israelite faith in Yahweh is thrown open, and Solomon seems to envision the temple becoming a place where the prayers of the Gentiles are welcome too. This is a strangely ecumenical moment for the people of Israel, but it also seems to forecast the reality of modern-day diasporic Judaism as well as a multi-denominational Christianity that has offers a Baskin-Robbins-style "31 flavors approach" to church life and belief. Perhaps it even could be said that these verses in Solomon's prayer open the theological door for the UCC's "No matter where you are on life's journey you are welcome here": a statement that formed the basis for the welcome of our recent "Still Speaking" campaign.

But as I hear this passage I am still clinking around in my armor, ready for confrontation. I am ready to "fasten the belt of truth around my waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness." I have the shoes for my feet and they are making me ready to proclaim something, but I'm not sure it is always the gospel of peace if I also have to work with "those Christians": the ones who keep calling on the phone, who keep up their protests, and who keep up their ridiculous political rhetoric. There are times when other Christians make me feel like the disciples in John's gospel, the ones who go away when the message of the power of the body and blood is too heavy and too scary. But the other disciples stay and reply, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." I concur with these statements, but dressed in my battle armor, ready to defend "proper theology" I might add just a few words to the disciple's answer. My answer might also include, after all, that "you are the Holy One of God" stuff, and "I am 100% sure I know how we respond to your call!" Surely then the way to follow Jesus will line up exactly with my social and political beliefs, and no one will be left to distort the truth of the gospel. I must admit though, the armor of God is getting a little heavy right now.

And that is how it goes, I think. In the same moment that I am outraged by the thought of pairing our Ephesians text with the militaristic imagery of "Onward Christian Soldiers," I also willingly find myself preparing for battle with those Christians with whom I so fundamentally disagree on so many social and political ideas. But what I need and I suspect we all need, is someone who will tap us on the shoulder, look us in the eye, and remind us that the gospel doesn't come from Burger King; it isn't sold to us so that we can "have it our way." That is simply not what the "bread of life" is meant to offer, even if our theological egos tell us otherwise.

A few weeks ago, the Mission Board was discussing a local Habitat for Humanity project called an "Apostle Built House" which pulls together 12 or so congregations who, together, finance and build a home for a local family in need. In the course of our meeting, Jacqueline Smith, our congregation's

liaison to our local Habitat affiliate, mentioned that one of the motto's of Habitat is that "we put down our differences when we pick up a hammer." That simple statement has been rolling around in my head for weeks; and it has great power because, too often I think, we steel ourselves for battle because we cannot get over places of disagreement in order to work for the good of all. It is as if we say, "It is my gospel, read it how I read it, or I'll take it and go home." But it doesn't have to be that way. Habitat for Humanity seems to know that, and just last week I gathered with another group of local people who also seem to understand this. This group of people is concerned about how the homeless population will make it through the coldest nights of winter and is seeking to put together a temporary shelter for December, January, and February. As I sat down for my first meeting with this group I was aware of the breadth of theological opinion among a group of ten or so people; yet what mattered was not whether we were theologically conservative or liberal but that we all saw that the gospel calls us to care for those that our society calls the "least of these": in this case, the homeless and addicted of our area who might just freeze to death if we don't find a way to care for them. And so we met; and because of some incredible leg work that was done long before I found my way to the table, there is a plan in motion that just might provide thirty or so warm beds that haven't otherwise been available. The group is theologically diverse and we live out and talk about the gospel in diverse ways and settings, yet the humanity of God's people is driving this group to get beyond theological differences and just live the gospel. And after that meeting I have to admit, the armor felt a little bit lighter.

During my vacation, many of you know that I spent one week as a counselor for the Middle School Aqua Camp at Camp N-Sid-Sen on Lake Coeur D'Alene in Idaho. After a week at Camp Adams and a week at N-Sid-Sen Family Camp, the *Peace Talks* curriculum used in all three weeks of camp was well engrained in my system and in my heart. The group of counselors I was assigned to took our turn leading the program time on the Friday of that camp and much of our task was to begin the conversation about how the youth might take the camp experience home with them and use it to make their own communities better based on the peacemaking and community skills they had been taught at camp. The youth came up with several ideas, but many expressed doubt that they could do it. They said things like, "My friends don't want to hear me talk about religion." "I believe in what happens here, but that is real life, man." "Camp only lasts a week." "You had to be here to understand, it just doesn't translate to my school."

And so I suggested to them that what was going to be much more powerful than telling their friends about camp was to act differently, to act more faithful—to be a peacemaker in their homes and schools. I even suggested that by showing their friends a different way to live that they were participating in evangelism, not something we are always very comfortable professing within the UCC, but nonetheless something that didn't have to be scary either. In one conversation group that day, a counselor took my comment a step further and remarked to the youth, "Remember the only Bible some people ever read is your life." I have lived with that comment since then; and when I haven't been wishing it had tumbled from my own mouth, it has been the comment that has stripped me of some of the armor I have put on for battle.

The letter to the church at Ephesus was written a long time ago in a context where the early Christians certainly needed armor and protection in order to share the gospel. Fortunately, in our context anyway,

that time has long since passed; but I am convinced that, too often, we still wear our armor so that we can battle those who are wrong in our eyes. The armor and shield might keep us safe, but are we really trained well enough to keep the sword of the Spirit from becoming just another weapon that we use to destroy each other? How do we keep away from the place where the armor of God simply allows us to become armed and dangerous, even to the very gospel that we proclaim to love? “The only Bible that some people will ever read is our lives”: This is a powerful statement of truth, and it should inspire us to recognize that our way isn’t the only way. This isn’t a call to abandon the justice work that the gospel calls us to do, but it is a call to do that work with humility and in a way that always imparts God’s grace. A piece of armor or two is just fine for protection and strength; but our lives, our humanity, and the fullness of the gospel must show through also; we cannot allow the armor of God to keep us at arms length from each other. Our passage from I Kings ends with these hopeful words, “that all the peoples of the earth may know God’s name and they may know that God’s name has been invoked in this house.” May it be true in all our lives, as we interact with all people!

Thanks be to God. Amen.