

EPHESIANS 6:10-19

Find your strength in the Lord, in his mighty power. Put on all the armor which God provides so that you may be able to stand firm against the devices of the devil. For our fight is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark world, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavens. Therefore, take up God's armor, then you will be able to stand your ground when things are at their worst, to complete every task and still to stand. Stand firm, I say. Fasten on the belt of truth; for coat of mail put on integrity; let the shoes on your feet be the gospel of peace to give you firm footing; and, with all these, take up the great shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take salvation for helmet. For sword, take that which the Spirit gives you—the words that come from God. Give yourselves wholly to prayer and entreaty. Pray on every occasion in the power of the Spirit. To this end keep watch and persevere, always interceding for all God's people. And pray for me that I may be granted the right words when I open my mouth, and may boldly and freely make known his hidden purpose for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may speak of it boldly, as it is my duty to speak.

THE ROOTS OF PEACE

Ephesians 6:10-19

Did you know that 33,000 Americans were killed last year by firearms—10,000 of them with self-inflicted wounds? Our youth homicide rates are more than 10 times those in other developed countries. Eighty percent of children living in urban areas have witnessed community violence and 70% have been victims at one time or another. One in four U.S. students report being bullied at school and 55% of our women have also been victims of violence, most often by someone they know, a full third of those at the hands of an intimate partner. Even more troubling is that 83% of girls in grades 8-12 experience some sort of sexual harassment in public schools.

What do these alarming statistics reveal about our society? Are we failing to address issues of poverty, racism, economic opportunity, crime, self-esteem, mental health and the overall well-being of our citizens? In the name of protecting Second Amendment rights, have we gone too far in allowing the easy access of guns in the hands of those they do not belong? Has the church failed—for all sorts of reasons—to be a prophetic voice in a society which by all indications has lost a sense of meaning beyond the accumulation of wealth and the exercise of privilege?

While we can look at the world and be thankful that few of our men and women are currently engaged in combat operations, we are more than aware that warfare is ripping apart many countries and that soldiers and ordinary citizens alike are dying every day, losing their homes, their villages, their entire way of life and in many cases risking everything to flee from the violence.

Well, what are we going to do about it? Is there anything we *can* do about it? Or to ask the question a different way, what is it that we can do to promote peace? Because what is abundantly clear from all these statistics and events is that too many people in the world have

no peace in their lives. And if we claim to be followers of Jesus who is the Prince of Peace, then we have to ask ourselves how it is that we can be ambassadors of peace not only globally, but in our own community. Today is both Peacemaking Sunday and World Wide Communion. To observe these themes, I would like us to consider for a few moments how we might make a difference.

I realize it is frustrating to ask questions like this because the challenges are so immense. What can we do to help achieve peace in the Middle East or to make our schools safer places for our children?

First, let us first be clear about the meaning of peace in the scriptures. We normally assume that it is the absence of conflict. If we are not fighting, we must be at peace—right? But in actuality it has a much broader definition. In the Old Testament, the word for peace is *shalom*. While *shalom* includes physical safety and material security, it also encompasses the spiritual elements of wholeness and well-being which are achieved by living in accordance with Divine Law. The emphasis is upon harmonious relationships with other people and with God.

In the New Testament, peace is again connected to following the two great commandments to love God and your neighbor as yourself. The practice of peace, therefore, includes not only our behavior, but also our state of consciousness. Standing firm against the forces of evil can be understood on both fronts: resisting the efforts of those who would guide us in a direction that intentionally marginalizes other people as well as managing the conflicts and challenges we experience within ourselves—the angry, selfish or judgmental impulses that lead us into stressful emotional states that challenge us to decide whether we shall live in harmony with our higher selves to which our faith calls us or whether we shall give in to words and actions which result in harm either to ourselves or to others.

Paul is very clear about the roots of peace. It really begins with courage: *Stand your ground when things are at their worst*. And he then goes on to talk about truth and integrity...*let the shoes on your feet be the gospel of peace to give you firm footing...take up the*

great shield of faith...give yourselves wholly to prayer and entreaty...pray on every occasion in the power of the Spirit. These are the roots of peace. Nehru said that: Peace is...a condition of mind brought about by a serenity of soul. Peace is not merely the absence of war. It is also a state of mind. Lasting peace can come only to peaceful people.

How peaceful are you? It is very difficult to be at peace within yourself when you struggle financially to pay your bills, when the demands of your job leave you physically and emotionally drained, when family members ask you to sacrifice time and energy you need to care for yourself, when the news media show graphic video of terrorist attacks or people boating through their flooded neighborhoods or wildfires shooting flames hundreds of feet high and the burned-out skeletons of homes.

And then there is the election. How anxious is it making you? The countless and repetitive ads on TV and social media are enough to drive you batty! Let's just get it over with!

Scientists who have conducted research on peace have concluded that it can only come not through diplomacy, summits and treaties, but through one person at a time. Why? Because stressed individuals create a stressed society that resorts to violence and force. We know violence doesn't work, but as long as we are frustrated and angry and blame other people for what's wrong with our country and our world, then we see no other options for change, no other way to stop the train going in the wrong direction than to blow it up.

Logically, we understand this. You are not going to eliminate Hamas or Hezbollah by killing all of their members. Because discrimination, hatred and violence have dominated the Middle East for millennia, warfare has been the only solution anyone could see for change. And it is unrealistic to assume that a quick alteration of consciousness will occur. But in the long run, it must or history will simply continue to repeat itself.

Here at home, we as Christians must take personal responsibility for dealing with our own stress. Perhaps we need to get up to that mountain top a couple of times daily to breathe deeply and let go of the turmoil bubbling inside of us. Because each time we allow ourselves to

get upset, we are unwittingly contributing to the consciousness of stress. Conversely, each time we find a place of peace within ourselves, we help to bring the rest of humanity closer to peacefulness within us.

Paul was right. *Stand firm...Fasten on the belt of truth, for coat of mail put on integrity; let the shoes of your feet be the gospel of peace to give you firm footing...For sword, take that which the Spirit gives you—the words that come from God. Give yourselves wholly to prayer and entreaty.*

Peace is our job. Let us look to no other than ourselves and accept the challenge!

The Reverend Thomas Dunlap

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