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## Proper 17 • Ephesians 6:10–20

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**Proper 17 • Ephesians 6:10-20 • August 30, 2015**

The image of the Christian as warrior has become more distasteful in recent years. War-weary people cringe at the classic battle hymns, fearing hymns like “Onward Christian Soldiers” create images of militaristic aggression that don’t fit with the gospel

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of peace. However, the hymn presents an image, not of a lone soldier, but of a unified army following Christ in love and charity.

Like a mighty army moves the Church of God;  
Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod.  
We are not divided, all one body we,  
One in hope and doctrine, one in charity. (*LSB* 662)

This image fits with the picture present in our pericope.

Paul does not shy away from military imagery in his letters (2 Cor 6:7; 10:4; 1 Thes 5:8; etc.), and this passage makes it clear Christians are very much in the midst of conflict. Our war however is not with the culture, capitalism, or government, but with the “rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (v. 6). Many sermons on this text move from this realization into an analysis of the armor the Christian is called to put on, perhaps offering a comparison between each physical item and its spiritual counterpart. One must be careful not to push the analogy too far and in so doing miss the importance of the image as a whole. Paul calls the Christian to put on “the whole armor of God” but not to lead the charge. Instead we are called to stand firm. Three times in verses 11–14 Paul calls Christians to stand firm in the faith as they wrestle with the principalities of darkness.

One must remember that we may still be in combat, but the war is already won. Words like “authorities” and “powers” should bring the reader’s attention back to the first chapter of the epistle. Paul makes clear the war is won. Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father. There Christ sits “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Eph 1:21). Christians are not called to win a war already won; they are called to stand firm as the final skirmishes are played out around them.

And they do not do this alone. Paul has been at pains throughout the letter to the Ephesians to emphasize the unity of the church in Christ. We are the “body Christ,” “fellow citizens with the saints,” “members of the household of God.” The image may be of each soldier putting on armor, but in the context of the letter as a whole it is hard to imagine one soldier standing alone. One pictures an army standing in unity so no enemy may pass through. The armor these soldiers are wearing is not gained by their own merit, but spiritual gifts they are blessed with (see chapter 1 and following). Their one weapon is drawn at the ready. Paul calls for this sword of the spirit to be used at all times in prayer and supplication.

Some scholars have taken this even further and, given the perceived liturgical nature of the letter as a whole, argue the armor is put on in and through corporate worship. Where better for the people of God to put on his armor and stand together? In the church service we are covered with the word of truth, the righteousness of Christ, presented with the gospel of peace, and pray as one body in the Spirit.

A sermon on this passage, then, might focus on the unity of the body in Christ

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together during worship and how we are armored by God to protect us from the “spiritual forces of evil.”

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