

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 23, 2015  
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### **Transformed from the Outside-In**

After a long day, sometimes I watch this delightfully mind-numbing program called “What Not to Wear!” It is a makeover reality show that features participants, nominated by friends and family, who need fashion help. Secretly the crew videotapes the nominee in daily life and the hosts comment on wardrobe mishaps. The contestant is given an opportunity for a shopping spree and makeover, if willing to follow the fashion guru’s advice.

Sorting through closets of ill-fitting, dated outfits, the contestants describe how wardrobe choices are made, with a hint of vulnerability. While the hosts use humor to challenge clients to take risks, what often emerges is fear of change and for some, a sense of shame or embarrassment. If this was all the show was about, I would have turned it off. But I became intrigued when the story turned to a journey of transformation, from the outside-in. Clothed in more fashionable garments and a new look, many displayed more confidence and a positive outlook that led to substantive changes, even after many months. Though so much more than appearance, who we are can be profoundly affected by what we put on.

In the Epistle from Ephesians, the writer offered advice on how to live the Christian life to a new community of believers. Addressed to these small bands throughout Asia Minor, the letter provided encouragement to this religious minority living within the Roman Empire. Influenced by pagan practices around them, facing persecution and even suppression by the authorities, Christ followers were in need of spiritual advice.

Given the culture of Roman militarism, the writer utilized vivid images of warfare to which many could relate. The armor of God was a metaphor meant to equip and empower the faithful in their struggles. Putting on this armor would not only protect them but shape their lives in the way of Christ. What they put on would profoundly influence who they were becoming.

Though a distinction was made between a cosmic struggle and enemies of flesh and blood, many suffered at the hands of occupied forces. Yet this strange armor contained only life giving qualities. The author suggests that this uncommon garb, if put on with faith and constancy, will empower us to live a transformed life.

What is this armor of God that offers us God’s strength to stand even in the midst of trouble? What gear could possibly disarm the forces that occupy us and also renew our Christian identity? First, we are invited to put on the belt of truth. This means seeking an understanding of God’s truth through prayer and study, pursuing the truth about ourselves and truth in all relationships. Second, we are to put on the breastplate of righteousness. Striving to be in right relationship with God guards our hearts and helps us to be in right relationship with our neighbor. Third, we are to wear the shoes of the gospel of peace. Wherever our journey takes us, we are called to spread God’s peace to all we meet. Carrying the shield of faith means trusting that God is with us and in us and has a plan for our healing and wholeness. This shield of faith protects us so that we may travel into the unknowns of life without fear. Putting on the helmet of salvation is simply accepting the gift of eternal life God offers. While we do not earn salvation, we can live it with

gratitude. Finally, donning the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God equips us with the wisdom of ages and Christ's abiding love.

Must we in this modern day suit up in protective garb and set out for battle amidst our culture's influences and distractions? Some believe this armor gives permission to take the offensive against the "other" for the sake of faith. Some wear a benign sense of Christian identity so as to be respectful of individual's differences. The life giving qualities of this armor of God assures that wearing these spiritual garments empower us to love our neighbor with respect for the diversity God has created, and be faithful Christians.

I am reminded of a scripture in Colossians bidding us to wear our Christian identity with grace, which seems particularly important in our pluralistic world. "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body." Increasing divisions among religions necessitate that we learn to inhabit our faith without turning our beliefs into weapons. "Combative piety" as it called, has influenced many young people to opt out of religion.

Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, *An Altar in the World*, writes about the power of human encounter and its healing potential. As inheritors of the gospel we have been given resources to love our neighbors without trying to change them. Barbara writes, "Where articles of belief threaten to set people in opposition to one another, we may embody peace. Where difference is demonized, we may host suppers with surprising guest lists. We may test the premise that God uses the weak to confound the strong as well as the promise that the God who made others different from us is revealed in them as well as us." The armor of God does not require us to do battle rather it clothes us with spiritual resources meant to transform us.

When I was in undergraduate school, studying psychology, I was assigned an internship at Eastern State Mental Hospital. Each week I visited an older gentleman who had been a resident for over thirty years, diagnosed with Schizophrenia. Talk about encountering the "other"- I was way out of my comfort zone. So I put on my best therapeutic persona to reach his confused and distorted thinking. Many times our conversations were broken by incoherent tangents and songs that interrupted his train of thought. Sometimes we would just walk the grounds together in silence. Each week, I would leave frustrated, feeling I had been of no help. He would send me on my way with a smile and a wave. I was looking for a tangible sign of improvement to fuel me for the next visit. I missed the simple truth that an unguarded encounter with one another, put us in touch with something sacred. At the end of the year I was palpably aware that our relationship had substance beyond anything I was able to accomplish. I dare say that I was the more healed and transformed as this unlikely connection unfolded.

We have been given tremendous spiritual resources to encounter an embattled world with assurance and peace. But we must first disarm our own occupying forces and intentionally clothe ourselves with what is life giving. What we put on in life profoundly shapes who we are. Even if this uncommon armor doesn't fit at first remember that God may be transforming us from the outside in. I pray we will inhabit God's love and inspire new generations to faith.