

Ephesians 6: 10-20

PUT ON THE ARMOR OF GOD

¹⁰ Finally, be encouraged by God's powerful strength. ¹¹ Put on God's armor so that you can make a stand against evil. ¹² We are fighting against human enemies [and] against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil [around us]. ¹³ Therefore, pick up the full armor of God so that you can stand your ground.... ¹⁴ So stand with the belt of truth around your waist, justice as your breastplate, ¹⁵ and put shoes on your feet so that you are ready to spread the good news of peace. ¹⁶ Above all, carry the shield of faith so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word.

¹⁸ Offer prayers and petitions in the Spirit all the time. Stay alert by hanging in there and praying for all. ¹⁹ As for me, pray that when I open my mouth, I'll get a message that confidently makes this plan of the gospel known. ²⁰ I'm an ambassador in chains for the sake of the gospel. Pray so that God will give me the confidence to say what I have to say.

Preachers choose scriptures and then weeks later, life happens. How do we fit the reality of our experience within our ancient scripture message?

When I chose this scripture, and our theme of clean-hearted living, I didn't realize how much I would be drawn into the "Black Lives Matter" movement. I have recognized my own white privilege for a long time, and I also realize I live distanced from it on the island of my own life. I have a life of comfort and security. Yes, as a woman, I have sometimes experienced discrimination by a male dominated society. But I also grew up on the cusp of the women's movement and have been grateful to know deep within that I could strive to be whatever I wanted to be. I am short. I have sometimes felt vulnerable with fear and hesitation when walking in unfamiliar places. But I have not known the trembling fear and anger that my friends of color have experienced as a given in their lives. I have a good friend who is just a few months younger than I am. Her life has been very different from mine for many reasons, but one of them is that she is African American - and lives with the constant isolation she feels in this largely white community. I can't possibly really know what that is like for her.

I have said in recent months, "All lives matter" and I sincerely believe this to be true. But I have come to realize that we must take a stronger stand. People of color are judged all the time just for what they look like. People have expectations, that are rarely accurate.... and they base their interactions and reactions on these limited and limiting ideas. I am horrified with each of the deaths that occur at the hands of law enforcement, clearly based on these kinds of disturbing judgments. Don't get me wrong; I realize that being in law enforcement is a very difficult and dangerous job. And Law Enforcement officers get killed too. I realize that our culture breeds an atmosphere of violence. Too many people of color are living in marginalized settings. They hurt and kill each other there, too. Thankfully there are communities where law enforcement members are being trained to be positive, contributing parts of the community. One such place is our neighbor, Richmond, CA

Many residents had long had contempt for the Richmond Police Department, with its decades-old reputation of racism and ruthlessness. The community rarely cooperated with officers, making even minor crimes hard to solve.

New to town, City Manager Bill Lindsay believed that change would come only with an overhaul of police practices. He turned to an unlikely reformer: Chris Magnus, the

white, gay police chief of Fargo, N.D.

A decade later, this minority-majority city has recorded its lowest homicide rate in 33 years. Officer-involved shootings are now rare: There have been two since Magnus came on board.

The officers know the guys on the street, they know their families, they know that they have kids, if they've been to school. Community mistrust has gradually given way to collaboration, thanks to deepening bonds between officers and the neighborhoods they serve.

Now, as angry residents riot over use of force in Baltimore — and Ferguson, Mo., before that — state and federal leaders are looking to Magnus, 54, to share his approach. [He] acknowledges that the gains have involved some luck. But he and outside experts attribute them largely to a hard-won culture change.

"We changed some of the ideas the police had about us, and we changed some of the ideas we had about them," said Bennie Lois-Clark Singleton, 80, who participates in weekly street walks to coax at-risk youths to reject violence.

These kinds of stories are very hopeful and encouraging, but I am still deeply troubled by how little it sometimes feels like we have come from the extreme prejudice and discrimination that was an accepted part of life just 50 years ago. Those water fountains are an abomination to me (Describe) I like to believe that if I had been born 150 years ago, that I would have stood and fought with my ancestors who were on the side of the Union Army and that I would have believed then with all my heart that "Black Lives Matter" ... that no one has the right to hold anyone's life in hostage.... to their will. That everyone is deserving of the same opportunities. Too many people of color are in prison.... too many are struggling socially and economically to just make a living that supports their life and their family's life. Too many don't feel like they are offered to participate in the "American Dream" of prosperity and comfort.

My own white privilege allows me to feel this pain.... and if I am not careful, it can also keep me blind to my part, to the ways that I might limit others. So, it is in this spirit of openness that like Maya Angelou we understand how important it is to honor our heroes and she-roes, those who guide us to a better world, to a path that leads to clean-hearted living.

Today we remember George Houser. George fought for justice and equality for all beginning in the 40's and even earlier, before it was PC to do so. He stood up and was willing to put himself in harms way to help create a world where we can all live together in peace, with shared freedoms. In a New York Times article published a few days ago, it was reported that in 1947,

George Houser and Bayard Rustin (who also created CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality) organized the first test of a United States Supreme Court ruling that barred segregation on interstate transit. Their campaign, called "the Journey of Reconciliation," sent black and white riders through the South on interstate buses — an act of great personal risk that met with acceptance in some cities and arrests and bloodshed in others.

That voyage, in which [George] and Mr. Rustin both took part, predated the Freedom Rides of 1961 by 14 years and is now widely described as having been the first of them.

George, who had been imprisoned shortly before the United States entered World War II for declaring himself a conscientious objector, was in later years also deeply involved in efforts to end apartheid in South Africa.

George's life was dedicated to racial justice. He put on the whole armor of God and stood firmly on the side of freedom for all.

And as I read the news this week, Jimmy Carter was there as well, another shining example of

someone who has lived his faith, who has been a disciple of Jesus in many of the life choices he has made. He has reported that he has cancer that has spread to his brain. He is nonetheless hopeful and trying treatments, and has said, "I'm surprisingly at ease. I've had a wonderful life, friends, I've had an exciting, adventurous and gratifying existence." Jimmy Carter has fought tirelessly for others, for women's rights, for housing for all, for peace here and abroad. He continues to live as if "Black Lives Matter."

In this month marking the one-year anniversary of Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, MO and the genesis of the Black Lives Matter movement, Robert Williamson has looked to Paul's passage to the Ephesians and speaks to the spiritual force of white supremacy—the belief (conscious or unconscious) that white life is more valuable than black life.

"The term "white supremacy" has usually been invoked in reference to vile and violent acts of racism." Williamson cautions us to not deny the ways that we are also engaged in this crippling white supremacy. Otherwise we might be living in a dream state that blinds us to the truth. In our comfort, we may forget that our lives have often been achieved at least partly

"through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the sale of children; and various acts meant, first and foremost, to deny [some]...the right to secure and govern [their] own bodies."

Our "Dream" of prosperity and comfort has a striking resemblance to what Paul calls "spiritual forces of evil." It is force that asserts itself in power relationships of privilege. It allows our innocence to be blinded by the violence and dehumanization that underlies life for so many.

Williamson has said that this passage from Ephesians calls us into the struggle against this spiritual power that is white supremacy—he calls "the cosmic power of death masquerading as legitimate earthly authority." We are called to relinquish the traditional armor of privilege and power and to replace it with righteousness, faith, and truth. We are called to abandon the false Dream and replace it with the true dream of God's reign, which demands justice for all and not privilege for a few. We are called to take off the boots used to trample others and to strap on "whatever will make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace."

These are strong mandates. Paul calls upon the Dreamers to awake. Paul calls us to take up the struggle. Strengthened by God's love, we are called into a life of clean-hearted living. We are called to join this holy effort.

(Sing) Create in me a clean heart O God,
and Renew a right spirit within me.

Give us the courage and "a right spirit" to stand tall for the cause of true justice for all!

Yes, Black live matter
Brown lives matter
All live matter

May we make this the true law of the land. Thank you, George Houser. May we have the courage to join you in the cause of racial justice. Thanks be to God!