

Text: Put on the whole armor of God.

Having grown up a non-Christian, non-theistic Unitarian there are more than just a few hymns that are common to the Christian tradition that I never knew until adulthood. One such hymn is *Onward Christian Soldiers*. Most of you, I am sure, know it:

Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,  
With the cross of Jesus going on before.  
Christ, the royal Master, leads against the foe;  
Forward into battle see His banners go!  
Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,  
With the cross of Jesus going on before.

I will never forget the first time I heard it. It was in the movie M\*A\*S\*H\*. It was sung farcically and I was, even then, unaware that it was actually a well-loved hymn until a kid in the dorm was said he was furious that the movie had skewered his favorite. "You mean, that hymn is for real" I asked dumbfounded. This sent everyone else in the room into hysterics and the boy who loved the hymn pouting into the corner. He and I talked about it later. As a non-Christian atheist I was sorely perplexed. After all, the little I had heard about Jesus were things like, "Turn the other cheek" and "Peace on earth goodwill to all" and "Love your enemies." So I was more than just slightly baffled that you could have a militaristic hymn and call it Christian. I told this to the offended party, he who was very active in ROTC and I who was a card carrying Conscientious Objector and, well, let's just say that things got interesting. And, even since I became Christian, I still don't get it.

I suspect that I am not alone here. I suspect that there are many in the sanctuary right now who do not associate the teachings of Jesus with such militaristic images, or at least not anymore. In fact, a quick check of the most recent hymnals that have been published by the major mainline denominations reveals that all but one dropped it; only the Methodists kept this hymn, and it caused a great and heated debate amongst its members. Though it did appear in the Pilgrim Hymnal, our own denomination decided to drop it from the New Century Hymnal. And this discomfort is probably why today's lesson is a bit discordant for at least some of us. Let's face it, helmets and swords and breastplates and shields are tools for war and that is not how many, if not most of us, see the church. The church is a servant for peace, in the name of the Prince of Peace who died on the cross forgiving his enemies. There is no way to get around that biblically.

Of the other hand (don't you just love that phrase?), this passage does raise the question of what is worth fighting for, and what that struggle would look like, if you are peaceful, that is. A while back, when asked for their first association when hearing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" (written by a Unitarian, oddly enough), most people associated it with the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle for racial justice of the 1960's. Pondering this fact, one of the great preachers of our day, William Willimon wrote, "Perhaps we forget, in a time of tame churches, toned-down preachers, and timid prophets that there was a time when the church believed that there was something worth fighting for."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Willimon, William; *Pulpit Resource*; Volume 22, No. 3, Year B, July, August, September 1994; page 32

Now THERE'S a thought. If we follow the Gospel of the Prince of Peace is there anything worth struggling for, or are we just milquetoast? Is there anything we are doing as Christian community that is so threatening to the world and its order that we actually need defensive armor? After all, as we heard in this morning's lesson the author of the epistle himself was "in chains" because he proclaimed the love of God. He clearly, fully expected that anyone who proclaims the way of love will be persecuted.

Of course, he did speak that BEFORE the western world was Christianized under the emperor Constantine. After that, well, what was the big deal? Everyone was Christian, right, even if that was forced at the point of a sword? Certainly growing up in the 1950's this was the common worldview. The only people I knew growing up who did not go to church were the Gogeks, and that was because they were Jews, and they went to synagogue each week, which was about the same as being Catholic for all I knew when I was eight-years-old.

Alas, it has changed now. Although a larger percentage of the population in Colorado goes to a house of worship on a Sunday than in my native Massachusetts, it is, even here, nothing like fifty years ago. Now when I am driving to church I see people loading their cars with their coolers and still others parking in our parking lot, unloading their bicycles and tootling down the Highline Canal. People who go to any house of worship of any religion now are becoming a shrinking minority, even amidst our "In God We Trust" republic.

While evangelicals decry the loss of a "Christian America" and liberals pine for the good old days when they did not need to be evangelical, the church is fast becoming an oddity, a relic, a nearly vestigial organ on the body of society. By some counts attendance at mainline churches has declined 80% in the past 40 years. Eighty percent. Where there were once one hundred seated in the pews, now there are twenty. This exactly mirrors our own church of First Plymouth. Yes, our attendance has in fact declined 80% since 1968.

And I am not so sure, I am really not so sure, that this is a bad thing. It is certainly forcing us, as it is forcing all mainline churches, to look hard at ourselves and to question why we exist. Do we have a purpose beyond listening to a minister drone on on Sunday mornings, teaching our kids a few stories and doing a few acts of outreach?

Let me actually phrase that last question differently. Do we have a message worth proclaiming, a ministry worth fighting for, a way of being in the world that calls the values of the larger society into question? If so, and I believe we do, in what ways would we need to strengthen ourselves if we were to take our progressive message beyond our own doors? Seriously. These are disconcerting questions because if we apply the ethical teachings of Jesus to our own society we are likely to face some serious backlash. Let the church question the economic engine that drives our society, let the church question militaristic solutions to cultural clashes, let the church question the value of rampant consumerism and we will find out real quick where we actually stand in relation to society at large, as well as find out where the real power lies. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. discovered, apply the gospel to the behavioral values of society, not the stated values, but the behavioral values, and the consequences are dire indeed. As church member Blake Chambliss recently wrote regarding the healthcare debate in his weekly advocacy newsletter, " There is something evil (a term I don't

like to use) about those who cynically profit by fanning the flames of ignorance and distrust, with hints of racism, into something so disagreeable." Right on, Blake. We must never forget that the gospel of the Prince of Peace resulted in his own crucifixion, the execution of his disciples and the persecution of any who followed him.

You know, oddly enough, it can be argued that it is rows like the Methodists had over whether or not to include "Onward Christian Soldiers" in the new edition of hymnal that have so significantly contributed to the mainline church's decline, just as is happening now in the debate over homosexuality. The Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War were defining moments in American history, and certainly in our churches. Someone told me that during the 1960's people protested against the war in this very sanctuary during a Christmas Eve service. And as, all across America, the churches' leadership took a stand for the gospel, upset church members left, either to no religion at all, or to startup churches that proclaimed America's military might and way of life as God's will. When the mainline church, which until that time had largely been the moral spokesperson for, and the keeper of, the values for society at large, began to take stands opposing society's behavioral values around race and militarism and consumerism as contrary to the gospel, the mainline was pushed out, out of the mainstream and into the margins: it no longer was seen as the moral spokesperson society at large; it no longer was the keeper of the values for society at large. And so it began the inevitable slide of any person or institution who stands, "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers". And then, by and large, church leaders were so shocked at the number of people who left the churches that they stopped leading, they stopped challenging, they stopped, quite frankly, preaching the gospel so they wouldn't upset anyone, because there is no way to preach the gospel and not upset people.

The church's decline is no accident. And it has left us a bit confused and bewildered, trying to understand what has happened, to come to grips with reality as it now stands, and to grapple with what it means to be behavioral followers of Jesus in a society that likes to talk his talk but not walk his walk. And so here we stand (or sit, I suppose), inheritors of a tradition that just a short time ago taught and supported the values of our culture, and even understood its role as producing good citizens to live and work in that culture, now finding ourselves on the outside looking in, wondering where to go.

Of course another way to look at this is that we choose to be on the outside—on the outside inviting others out: inviting others out to a different set of behavioral values and choices, inviting others out to a community that witnesses to the way of incarnational community in an increasingly materialistic, militaristic and individualistic world, inviting others out . . . and in so doing, inviting them in. I have yet to find anywhere in the Gospels that gives us any choice in this matter. This is **PRECISELY**, almost uncannily so, the position of the early church in relation to its own society: voices crying in the wilderness, inviting others out-and-into a beloved community of witnesses to the way of love.

I truly struggle sometimes with what it means today to be a Christian, to be a Congregationalist, to be a minister, to lead a mainline church and to preach the Gospel, whether that is happy making or not. Often it is not. (What am I supposed to do with a passage like this? Ignore it and preach only happy ones?) But I am nonetheless convinced that there are some

things worth fighting for. I am convinced that that there are struggles worth having. I am convinced that it is better to be on the outside looking in at the thrones of power, than to be on the inside looking out at the consequences of that power. I am convinced, as Gandhi said, "It is better to die in the way of God than to live in the way of Satan." And so the gospel invites us forward, onward, asking the church to keep at it until the work is done, asking the church to continue the work of Jesus knowing that his followers need to be strengthened against the inevitable backlash, asking the church to be faithful no matter the cost, for there IS a cost to discipleship. So hear again these words, written nearly 2,000 years ago, to a faith community in a startling similar situation:

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of this power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 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. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*

*Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.*  
Amen and amen.

The Reverend George Anastos

### PASTORAL PRAYER

O Great Shalom, you gird us with all goodness and righteousness and call us to the battle within--against the sins and shadows which separate us from you, which confuse us and obscure our vision of light, which make us prey to doubts and faithlessness. You gird us with the message of the gospel and the power of the Spirit and call us to the battle without-- against the forces of injustice, of prejudice, of hate, of violence, of poverty, of war, of greed.

O Great Shalom, you give us the example of your anointed one, our brother Jesus, who refused to bow before hypocrisy or before worldly agendas which reward some people by destroying others. Raise in us the strength and faith to do all that we can to name evil and darkness and pain. Raise in us the strength and faith to act as healing agents in your name and, then, in the face of persecution and rage and disdain, to stand firm in the right.

O Great Shalom, pour into us and through us streams of mercy and justice to water your creation. Fill us with the words we are to speak as your ambassadors for peace. Fill us with the Word which guides us to a deep compassion for our sisters and brothers, enabling us to act with confidence on their behalf to create with you your commonwealth of abundant joy. Amen.