

GETTING INTO CHARACTER

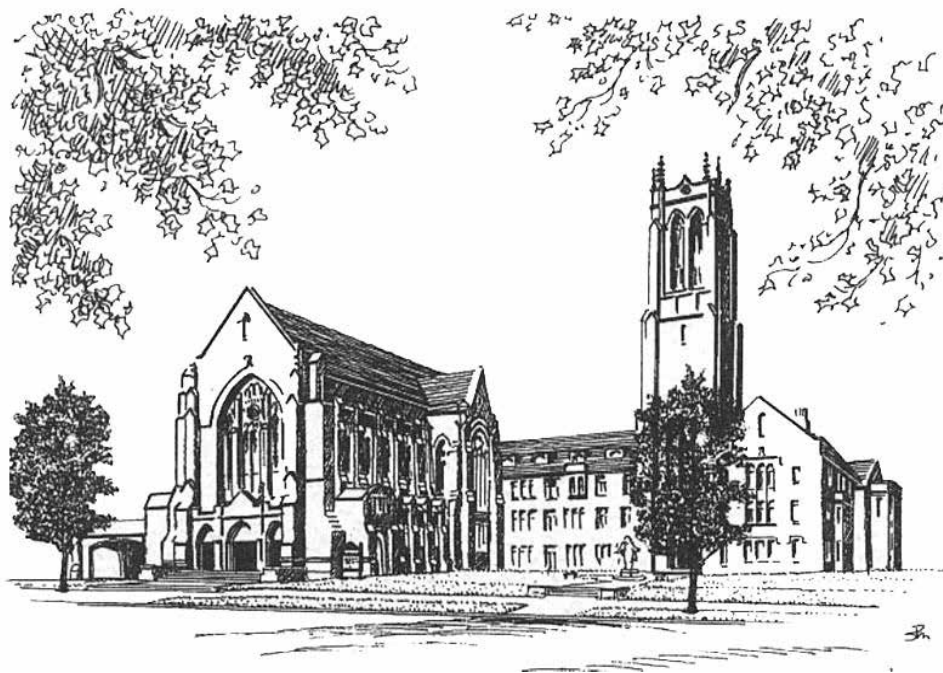
by

Rev. Eleanor Colvin

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Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

9:45 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

www.stpaulshouston.org

Texts:

1 Kings 8:(1, 6, 10-11) 22-30, 41-43 • Psalm 84 • Ephesians 6:10-20 • John 6:56-69

Before I was a pastor, I was a journalist. Before I was a journalist – and while I was a journalist – I was an actor. One thing you learn as a performer is that there are multiple ways to build or “get into” character.

Some people cannot become who they will be on stage until they are in full costume – wigs, shoes, make up, all the regalia. For them, characters are built from the outside in. Every piece one puts on adds dimension to the role they play. Others build from the inside out – meditating on why they speak the words they were given to speak, understanding why their character would choose to eat a particular food or their motivation for dressing a particular way. In my opinion, the best among us recognize the value of both practices, and we build characters from the inside-out and from the outside-in. I believe the texts our lectionary offers today are instructive on how we might build Christian character both from the inside-out and from the outside-in.

Walk with me first through the letter to the Ephesians. This passage represents the full Christian costume or wardrobe:

The belt of truth

The breastplate of righteousness

Shoes ready to proclaim the Gospel of peace

The shield of faith

The helmet of salvation

The Sword of the Spirit.

The whole armor of God. The passage is not just a list of wardrobe pieces – it is also considered by scholars to be a call to battle. Getting dressed in God’s whole armor is both an act of protection from spiritual forces at work in the world and an act of power – a reporting-to-duty of sorts – that declares one’s willingness to work on God’s behalf in the world. Even today, a soldier’s wearing of uniform implies her or his willingness to go to war. The text tells us to put on the whole armor because we are warring not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against spiritual forces and evil in high places.

Yes, your pastor knows that evil isn't a popular subject. I know it's not something we like to talk about in the church in general. But evil exists, friends. The old adage goes that a pastor should prepare a sermon with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. You see the news. And while the stories may appear to be doings of this person or that person, our scripture tells us: we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but spiritual forces and evil in the heavenly realms. Evil is at war with our Good God. And as the body of Christ, we are not allowed to be spiritual pacifists. Instead, we're called to suit up – to put on the whole armor so that we may be able to withstand God's spiritual enemies.

There are several definitions of *withstand*. The most appropriate for this reading are to resist, to defy, to bear up against. This is the whole purpose of putting on the whole armor of God. This is the character or role which we embody when we wear this armor, we begin a “from the outside-in” process that enables us to withstand God's spiritual enemies.

And who are God's spiritual enemies? To answer that question, I believe we have to consider what is important to our God, what does God want in this world? The first answers that came to mind for me were reconciliation, salvation and wholeness of God's people, and shalom. I should add that shalom really cannot be reduced to our simple definition of “peace,” but is biblically defined as total wellness for all. If these are the things scripture tells us God desires in the world, then it stands to reason, that anything standing in the way of those things – wholeness and wellness and reconciliation of all people – is standing in spiritual opposition to God.

And so we are called to use God's truth, our faith, our readiness to share the Gospel of Peace and so much more to stand against and to war with these forces.

Essentially, we put on our “costume” – our helmet of salvation, we take up our sword of the spirit – and simply having the right props in our hands enables us to participate in God's plan of salvation. Building character from the outside-in, we use these tools; they enable us to be Ambassadors for God as Paul claims to be at the conclusion of this letter. Ambassadors, friends. That's the role we play at work,

in school, in the grocery store, on the golf course – wherever we have been sent in this world.

In addition to armor as our primary wardrobe, this passage tells us we are to be clothed in prayer.... “Pray in the spirit at all times....keep alert, always persevere, and pray also for me,” the writer says. In God’s great salvation drama, we have all been cast as ambassadors. And instead of letting us pick out our own look from the costume trunk, God says: *“put on my whole armor.”* Salvation, truth, righteousness, the Spirit, faith, and the Gospel of peace – *“this is what I want you to wear; these are the weapons of my warfare.”* This is God’s recommended wardrobe for those of us called to be God’s ambassadors. (Which, by the way, is all of us.) This is the recommendation for building our character as Christian Ambassadors from the outside-in –putting on the whole armor of God.

Christ also offers a recommendation for how we might build Christian character from the inside-out in John 6. Today’s text is the conclusion of a lengthy conversation for many verses of John – which we’ve explored in sermons for at least three weeks here at St. Paul’s. This message that confounded the disciples and others at Capernaum is controversial for us today as well. Just as Christ “stands in the place” of the Manna our ancestors ate, he also stands in the place of all we need today, all we can secure for ourselves, all we can reason or understand. Christ is telling the disciples and us that his flesh and blood are the fulfillment of all things and are the source of eternal life. This cornerstone belief of our faith is certainly challenged by those outside the faith or by the spiritual forces with which we war. But this belief can sometimes be tough even for Christians to truly believe. To truly trust. We protest, just as the disciples did. And, Christ invites us into further discourse – just as he did with the disciples.

We hear the invitation resound through the ages in our church liturgy: Christ our Lord invites to his table all... This invitation to salvation and reconciliation was the entire reason Christ was sent into the world. It is the entire reason that he was

“the bread that came down from heaven.” The bread sent because God so loved the world. So much that John 3:17 says, Jesus was sent in the world not to condemn it but to save it.

And Jesus has the nerve to tell them all this in the synagogue of all places! Not way out on a lake somewhere or on the side of a hill. Not in one of these small towns they’ve walked through. Not in a sinner’s home. He offers this “hard teaching,” as the text calls it, in the synagogue – the center of religious learning. Brace yourselves, because sometimes a progressive, prophetic teacher is going to stir the sensibilities, going to offend us good church goers, as we see in Jesus’ interactions with the disciples and those in the synagogue.

After much conversation and questioning, the 12 remained steadfast. But the text tells us that many stopped following Jesus at this point. After witnessing the healings, after hearing other counter-cultural teachings, after being miraculously fed, people turned away upon hearing Jesus was the bread that came down from heaven and was the one who came to give life eternal. I don’t know why that was more unbelievable than walking on water or raising a dead girl. But it was. At this point, people stopped following him.

I’m not sure what your breaking point is. I don’t know what part of Christ’s teaching or way of being is just too much for you to swallow.

Is it the radical inclusivity – these incessant invitations to all?

Is it the confidence of the power of God at work in him?

He doesn’t seem to question God in the ways that we might. So....flesh and blood can really atone for the sins of the whole world and restore their relationship to you?

So.....even if they don’t understand the power of my blood and flesh – or really believe it’s working – it’s still going to cover them? He doesn’t question as we might.

Is it the demands Christ makes on your money, your vote, your time?

I don’t know what things confuse you or confound you, but I do know Christ is calling to you as the hymn says: Eat this bread, drink this cup – come to me and

you will not hunger; eat this bread, drink this cup – come to me and you will not thirst.

Christ invites us to the table to continue the discourse he began with the disciples. Christ invites us to slow down amid the rush of our lives to offer us a taste of eternal life. He invites us to the table to sample the food of believers – so that we might build our Christian character one Eucharistic meal at a time – from the inside-out. He invites us to the table so that we might become ambassadors.

He himself was God's ambassador. In his invitation to follow him, he showed us how we are to walk as we play the role of ambassadors. In his invitation to eat of him – the bread which came down from heaven – he offers us a taste of the food that sustains an ambassador. These invitations are important because they allow us to experience Christ – to taste the miracle of his life, just as our ancestors tasted Manna in the wilderness and then knew that God was with them. Likewise, we come to believe and know that Christ is the bread of life *as* we are fed by him – physically, as occurred earlier in this chapter with the feeding of the 5,000, and spiritually.

What does it mean for us today to taste and see that the Lord is good...?

And how does what we taste begin to transform us from the inside-out?

If the saying “you are what you eat” is true, then who do we become and how will we behave, when we eat of the bread that came down from heaven, the word made flesh?

It matters not whether we build our Christian character from the outside-in or the inside-out. The spiritual practices that enable us to put on the whole armor of God help us become ambassadors for God's good purposes in the world. Believing that the flesh and blood of our savior transforms our own flesh and blood is inside-out work. And together, they help us become who God would have us to be – Ambassadors, clothed in the whole armor of God, sustained by the bread that came down from heaven to give eternal life. Theatrically speaking, one is usually not allowed to eat in costume. But, I would imagine exceptions could be made for God's ambassadors who are feasting on

the bread of life while clothed in the whole armor of God. Therefore friends, it matters not if you begin building Christian character from the outside-in or the inside-out, what matters most is that you play your role in God's salvation drama.

Be an ambassador for good.

Fight and defy evil.

Feast on the flesh that gives eternal life.

Most Sunday sermons also are available via the church website, www.stpaulshouston.org, as well as pre-printed and on CD. Access the sermons on the website via either the Worship section or the Media Center. The pre-printed sermons are in the information rack at the Jones Plaza entrance to the Sanctuary Building. To order a \$5 CD of the complete worship service, contact Phyllis Brockermeyer at 713-528-0527 or pbrock@stpaulshouston.org.