8-25/26-18 Rev. Amy Haines

Ephesians 6:10-20 Move…In Love

What is the best motivational speech you have ever heard? Was it in a football huddle or at a commencement ceremony? Was it in a movie or beside the deathbed of a loved one?

As a member of my college choir I attended every commencement ceremony and opening convocation. Yet the only speaker that I can vividly recall was Mr. Dave Longaberger, as he shared his personal story of overcoming all odds, standing firm in faith, and building up a company when no one believed he could so do. He encouraged us to follow our dreams and not be held back by our limitations.

Consider these motivational words:

Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do.

*-John Wooden*

Life is ten percent what happens to you and ninety percent how you respond to it.

*-Lou Holtz*

Continuous effort - not strength or intelligence - is the key to unlocking our potential.

*-Winston Churchill*

--www.inspirational-quotes-and-quotations.com

Do or do not. There is no try.

*-Yoda, The Empire Strikes Back*

Words have power. They can stop us in our tracks, or spur us forward. They can tear us down or lift us up.

Motivational words and speeches will not simply offer us encouragement and hope; they will also spur us forward, calling us toward a specific action.

Such is the case with Paul’s final words today.

Throughout this month of August we have pondered Paul’s words of encouragement and challenge to the early church in Ephesus, words that invite us as well to live in community with one another built on a foundation of love. We are called to build up one another in love. To live in love. To give thanks in love. To move forward in love.

Today, like a coach in the final huddle or a dying man imparting wisdom with his final breath,

Paul is continuing to remind the early church who they are and who they are called to be.

They are God’s beloved with a powerful message of a crucified and risen Savior and Lord.

They are not called to hoard such a message, but to boldly move out into the world to share such good news.

Paul’s message to Ephesus is also a message to us today. We, too, have a powerful message of salvation and hope to proclaim to the world around us. We, too, are not called to hoard such a message, but to boldly move out into the world to share and live the love we have received.

Yet the journey ahead will not be easy. Paul knew that Christ’s followers represented a new way of living that the world did not understand. They pledged allegiance to Jesus, not the Roman Emperor. They upset the socio economic expectations of their day that kept everyone in their place. They reached out in love, not fear, forgiveness, not hate, compassion, not callousness.

While you and I are no longer public enemy #1, we still live in a world that does not understand the power of the Gospel message. Some dilute it. Some ridicule it. Some confuse it. Some refuse it.

And although we may disagree with our neighbors, Paul reminds us to continue to reach out in love to those around us. We are not called to add to the divisive, hateful rhetoric that surrounds us. Rather, we are called to reach out in love, remembering that even those with whom we disagree are God’s beloved children.

Paul insists that our struggle is less against the people in this world and more against the cosmic forces that seek to pull us away from God. For Paul, our battle is against the devil and his evil, scheming ways, a battle that is ultimately for the salvation of our souls. With such a mentality, this is also a battle that will never end until we meet Jesus face to face.

Consider how Ephesians 6:12 is translated in *The Message*:

“This is not an afternoon athletic contest that we’ll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-and-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.”

So how do we stand firm in faith in the face of such adversity?

How do we stand strong throughout the struggles of faith in daily life?

Paul reminds us that we stand firm by remembering that those whom God calls, God equips.

Thankfully, we do not go forth in our own strength. Instead, we are called to “be strong in the Lord and the strength of his power.” We are called to rely not on our own stamina but trust in the power of the Holy Spirit moving in and through and among us, filling us with God’s power.

When we trust in God’s power, we can also be open to the gifts God has given us. Gifts of oneness and thankfulness. Spiritual gifts in which to build up the community of faith, and diverse gifts that join together in the body of Christ. Today, Paul adds to this gift list the armor of God, qualities and characteristics that assist us in living into our identity as followers of Jesus.

..Charles Lawless once said,

“Putting on the armor of God involves accepting one’s identity in Christ and then living obediently out of that identity.”

--Charles Lawless, “Spiritual Warfare & Evangelism” sbts.edu, 2001

Trying to live like Jesus without claiming such an identity, without putting on the qualities of God as listed in the armor of God, we will be hard pressed to move forward in faith, living like an athlete with the wrong gear or wrong uniform.

Would you ever run the bases wearing football pads or make a tackle in a golf polo and slacks?

Would you ever try playing soccer with a tennis ball or ice hockey with a volleyball?

Then why do we seek to follow God without taking upon ourselves God’s own qualities?

Military members must also have the correct gear and uniform depending on their location and responsibility during deployment. Kevlar vests are good in Iraq but not on a submarine. Dress uniforms may be practical when meeting heads of state but are not practical when on patrol.

Having the right gear in sports can be the difference between health and injury.

Having the right gear in war can often be the difference between life and death.

In his book, ARMS AND ARMOUR THROUGHOUT THE AGES, Helmut Nichols said that one of the first people to ever wear suits of armor were the Sumerians. The Sumerians lived in Mesopotamia, where Father Abraham came from, and they were the first people to wear helmets and heavy leather coats to protect them in battle. The heavy coats were the first armored suits. This book also concludes that armor was always intended to be worn during wars. Armor was not to be worn to a picnic, a family reunion, or a party. Armor was intended for war, and only a fool would go into battle without wearing his full suit of armor.

--Edward Markquart, sermonsfromseattle.com, adapted

Warriors are called to wear their full armor when in battle. Athletes are called to wear the correct clothing, pads and gear when in a game. Most businesses and schools have dress codes that are to be abided. Would you ever go into any of these situations wearing the wrong clothes? Not if you’re smart, you won’t.

But how many of us will enter our daily Christian journey without the proper attire of faith, without the full armor of God?

Listen to how *The Message* translation encourages us:

“Be prepared. You’re up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it’s all over but the shouting you’ll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You’ll need them throughout your life. God’s Word is an indispensable weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long.

Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other’s spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.” --MSG 6.13-18

Imagine clothing yourselves with the armor of God as you seek to live by God’s ways in everyday life.

First you don the belt of truth, wrapping yourself in the truth of God’s word as the basis for all decisions. When we are held up by God’s truth then we are called to speak the truth in love to one another. Speaking the truth, in the church as well as in all our relationships, leaves no room for lies, gossip or rumors.

Second you put on a breastplate of righteousness, which covers the heart. This righteousness is right relationships with God, others and even ourselves. When we protect Christ at the center of our lives, in the depths of our hearts, then we will begin to mirror Christ in healthy relationships with others.

Next you place on your feet shoes ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. I picture here more athletic shoes than military boots. These shoes help us to remember our sure footing in Christ that moves us toward reconciliation and the end of conflict, focusing on Christ instead of our differences. These shoes also help us to be ready at a moment’s notice to move swiftly to share the good news of Jesus with others or to serve others in the name of Christ. When we are hesitant in our walks with Jesus then we will be hesitant to share the good news of Jesus.

Next you pick up the shield of faith that will protect you from the flaming arrows of the devil.

This faith includes trust in God, trust that God is with us, will strengthen us in times of trouble and offers us the gift of eternal life. It is when we put down our shields, even temporarily, that we allow sin and temptation and the arrows of the devil to wound us.

Following the shield of faith put on your helmet of salvation. This helmet covers your brain, the place where you know who and whose you are, a beloved child of God called to live as a disciple of Jesus. This helmet is like a security blanket that reassures us of the gift of our salvation through faith in Jesus. It is not a gift to question or worry about, but one to accept by faith. When we are assured of our salvation then we can think clearly about how to respond to such a gift of salvation and how to best live by faith.

So far all of our armor is defensive pieces meant to protect us. The only offensive weapon we are called to have is the sword of the Spirit, which is our knowledge of God’s Word as found in the Scriptures. When we spend time in God’s Word then it becomes a part of us, a living resource that helps us not to condemn or cut down others but to love others and challenge injustice in peaceful, non-violent ways.

Alongside our armor of God we are also called to have the weapon of prayer. We are called to pray in the Spirit, to pray for ourselves, the church and one another, to pray for strength to stand strong in the midst of the battles of this world.

When the Israelite leaders neglected to pray in the Spirit before a battle, often God would allow them to lose to remind them to rely on God’s strength and not their own. When we pray we are not to pray for our own selfish desires, but to pray for God’s strength, guidance and understanding. Only then will we know how to approach the battles of our day.

There is one more weapon that is not listed directly by Paul, yet is implied throughout the letter to the Ephesians. And that weapon is each other, members together in the body of Christ.

Can you imagine suiting up as a soldier and being sent out alone? Can you imagine trying to be successful at any team sport without a team?

Picture in your mind the front defensive line of a football team determined to make a goal line stand. Picture in your mind riot police in full gear, standing shoulder to shoulder, defending people and property.

That is the formation of the ancient Roman legions. Putting on the whole armor meant more to the Roman soldiers than strapping on their gear; it also meant standing shoulder to shoulder in formation, as part of a greater unit. Being together was part of their defensive armor in battle, a stance that was hard to defeat.

--adapted greatly from “The Liquid Armor of God” 8-23-09 homileticsonline.com

As followers of Christ, as members of the community of faith, the church, we are called to stand together; we are called together to proclaim the gospel of peace. We are called to pray for one another; we are called to learn together; we are called to support one another; we are called to witness together.

We are each individually equipped with the armor of God, yet when we stand together we are stronger together, and when we are stronger together we will find it easier to move forward together in love.

I would not be here today if it wasn’t for men and women throughout my faith journey who encouraged me and nurtured me, challenged me and loved me. Be they Sunday School teachers or choir members, pastors or friends, honest church members or clergy colleagues,

each one has guided my faith journey forward to the next step, even when I wanted to take a step back, kicking and screaming. They have reminded me time and again that we are in this together.

We are one body with one hope following one Savior led by one Spirit. We are called to build one another up in love, to give thanks together in love, to live by love in what we do and what we say, so that we are constantly moving forward in love.

We are not called to simply stand and guard what has been entrusted to us. Instead, we are called to share what we have experienced, to share what we have learned, to share the power of being together as the body of Christ in this world.

Give thanks today for all who have stood firm in faith in order to give you a place to worship today. Give thanks today for all who have shared their faith and helped you to be here today.

And give thanks that God has placed you in someone else’s life, to be the church together.

Now, as you go forth to be God’s people in this world, my hope and my prayer is that you will take Paul’s words to heart. Choose to live in loving community with each other. Be intentional in building up one another, even when you disagree. Be intentional in imitating God, in words and action. Be intentional in worshipping together. Be intentional in standing firm together.

Pray for and with one another.

Most of all, remember that together you are the body of Christ, the community of faith, the people of God, the church in this world.

Give thanks for your place in the church, listen for God’s call as God’s people, put on the armor of God, then go forth as Christ’s followers in love, in life, in service.

May it be so, let us pray.