

Spiritual Armor

This is our fifth week that one of our scriptures has come from the 6th chapter of John's gospel; the chapter that focused and circled around Jesus' I am statement of identity about being the Bread of Life—his comparison of himself to the manna which came down from heaven. Although the narration itself began with the literal feeding of the five thousand with a meal of very real bread, when the crowd followed Jesus back to Capernaum Jesus' teachings clearly went beyond that one meal. When Jesus tried to teach them they were being offered something more lasting than something to satisfy daily hunger, the crowd resisted his teaching, being resistant to what he was offering. Jesus tells them they he is the living bread which has come down from heaven, and it that bread, his life, which will be given for the life of the world—thus what John describes is seen as a foreshadowing of Christ's passion and the statement that read as the opening of this morning that "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" is a metaphor. From where we stand, as Easter people 2000 thousand years post-resurrection, when we read these words we understand them as references to the Eucharist, that name given to the elements of our communion sacrament. Yet, those hearing those words for the first time were repelled by the images of flesh-eating and blood drinking. Many in the cultures surrounding them, hearing them and understanding them as literal statements about actions, believed Christians participated in these sacraments in a literal sense; and thought of them as referring to some type of cannibalistic rituals. Verse 60 gives this response by disciples to this teaching of Jesus: "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Today, Christians regularly gather together to eat what we rather casually call "the body and blood of our Lord." We often quickly chalk up the sacramental meal, this eating of Jesus' body and blood as "just" a metaphor. When we do this we may miss the power of what happens at the Lord's Supper, at the Table where our Lord is our host. According to our faith what happens is this: the Father brings his Son to us—or to phrase it more precisely in Reformed Theology terms—God brings us into the presence of his Son at the right hand of the Father so that we can commune, really and truly, with the one who came down out of love and lived among us and gave up his flesh and blood for us. In our world where advice on every subject is available, advice about health matters is easy to find. Many times as people are giving out this advice it centers on telling us what type of diet to follow. We just might hear the phrase, "you are what you eat", and given what we proclaim to eat each time we gather at the Lord's Table, we are clearly meant to be Jesus. Verse 56: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." For we do often gather at the Lord's Table to "eat of the body and blood, the bread of life and the cup of salvation. As those gathered by him, we are to be Jesus to one another, we are to be Jesus to our community, we are to be Jesus to the whole world. Jesus' invitation for the people to partake of the living bread which came down from heaven connected to the Exodus story on more than the obvious level or the manna reference. As in the Exodus story, the issue is not simply the grumbling of the people but the continued lack of trust in God that it represents: "some of you do not believe" Jesus tells those listening to him in the synagogue in today's passage. In verse John6:64 the Greek word *pisteuo* is used and translated as believe. Yet the more common meaning for this Greek verb is to trust or to rely upon someone. The difficulty expressed here in John's narrative is that those

listening in the synagogue is not just that they have trouble with the cognitive content of Jesus' teaching, but they also lack trust and a willingness to rely on his promises that God's reign is near. Like the Israelites in the desert, they have experienced God's miraculous provision, but they do not trust that God will continue to provide for them in the wilderness. In order to partake of Jesus as manna, as the living bread, there must be a reliance on God. One way John expresses this throughout the gospel is through that word "abide". The idea of abiding appears throughout John's gospel account, although it is also often translated as remain. It is through this feeding on Jesus as manna, this remaining or abiding with Jesus, this close proximity that Jesus brings life to us. It is through Jesus' constant presence with us that we have access to the abundant life—that is promised in the present tense. So if we are to be Jesus in this world and experience this presence, how do we go about it? In the final exhortations to the Ephesians the writer used another metaphor—one drawn from the daily life in the Roman Empire—the equipment of a soldier in the Roman army. The writer told the assembly of Christian believers to put on the whole armor of God and be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Although the imagery is based on a military theme, the struggle that is declared is against spiritual forces of evil, not others. When looking into this armor as the writer describes it, it is wise to discern that it is designed for defense not attack. In this passage we see that God both owns and provides our armor. The writer summons us to "put on the full armor of God" and "take up" the various pieces of it. These words are there to remind us that although God provide us the resources to arm ourselves against the temptations and evils of our broken world, we must take up the struggle ourselves using what God provides. Roman soldiers wore things like helmets, breastplates, shields, and swords as part of their effort to keep the Roman Empire and its citizens, including Paul and his Ephesian readers under Caesar's bloody boot. Roman armaments were among the instruments of terror that Roman forces used to intimidate and suppress people. Yet Paul is not inviting his readers to don these items to go out and terrorize and intimidate others. He is issuing an invitation to become armed for self-defense. The only possible exception was the inclusion of the sword, which would not have been that useful to someone armored that way except to ward off attack. Paul would have believers defend ourselves with the belt of truth, not as something to be used to batter those with whom we disagree, but as something to be held to firmly to battle doubt. The same would go for the armor that is righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith which will allow us to quench the flaming arrows of doubt. To do these things is basically to what Jesus was asking of those who first heard his words: to rely and trust on the provision that God has made for us. The implication of Ephesians 6:10 is clear: God's gift of grace has enemies; God's justice has forces which oppose it; God's peace is marked for attempted destruction. There were then and are now many things in this world which are opposed to the vision of God's reign found in the teachings of Jesus: those teachings of love which break down barriers of hostility with love and forgiveness. We are known by our associations, and when we hobnob with those known forgivers and peace-mongers we must expect a strong reaction from those who traffic in accusations and innuendo. In the end, we might know that Jesus' expectations for the life we are to live are so counter-cultural that the only way we can truly live out those ways is through putting on that armor—and abiding in him and allowing his abiding in us to be visible to the world. In the end, it is all about power. Human distortion of power thrive in

secrecy, in dissembling, in violence, and in the capacity to drive a wedge between groups by driving a wedge between groups by promoting fear and suspicions. But the strength of the Lord, the non-armor armor that ensures our victory is transparency, mercy, peace and an absolute trust in the dynamic interplay of Spirit and Word, of the vision of God for us as revealed in the life of Jesus. Where we go and how we act, are indications of where we take the shield of faith. One commentary I read wondered about what type of shoes we wear and quoted Frederick Buechner who wrote in *Wishful Thinking*, “if you want to know who you really are as distinct from who you like to think you are, keep an eye on where your feet take you.” Peace is the goal. Our feet, not our words, will get us there. The commentary talked about being able to tell what type of day was planned by the type of shoes were worn as one left the house for the day—dress shoes, running shoes, flip-flops, etc. His conclusion was that in his experience spreading peace is hard work; that work boots with steel toes would probably work best. We are called to be those who continue the mission of Jesus in this broken world—considering the state of this world—that is not an easy assignment—it never has been. I find it ironic that one of the songs written to support the peace movement by John Lennon which had a noble goal: figuring out what could be done to bring about greater peace and harmony in our violent, factious world had the wrong way to get there. The song is “Imagine”. In it, he invited people to imagine how much better life would be if only we could get rid of the things that most often lead people to fight. So he asked us to imagine no country and so nothing to live or die for in terms of patriotic causes. He suggested we imagine having no possessions that we usually fight to keep. But he also suggested we imagine how much better this world would be if we got rid of religion. If there were no doctrines to squabble over, no God in whose name we would launch crusades or jihads or inquisitions, then perhaps global tranquility would follow. But although Lennon had the right goal, the fact is that as created in God’s image, humanity is irreducibly and irresistibly religious. The very man who wanted to rid the world of religion has become himself an object of a kind of worship as the place known as “Strawberry Fields” in New York City is known shows as people gather there to light candles. To be human is to worship something. For believers in Jesus Christ, our place of worship can be anywhere as long as we are true to and transparent to the Savior whom we serve and to whom we are supposed to witness in everything we say and do. Again, the invitation Lennon expressed resembles the one Jesus spoke of as what the reign of God would look like; a place where there were no barriers between all of God’s beloved children. Jesus told us his mission was to announce the nearness of that reign. He gathered and taught disciples about that kingdom, then sent them out to further the mission. We are to continue it. It is still not an easy assignment, but we have been given what we need to go forth on that mission—we have feasted many times at our Lord’s table—we have been provided with the bread of life and the cup of salvation—given the whole armor of God. God has given provided all that we need for us to have the abundant life, we just need to have confidence and trust in that provision. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

