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Sermon-August 17, 2008
Ephesians 6:10-20

Paul, you're really cheesy. Armor of God? Breastplate of Righteousness? What is that, really? And what's with all the war imagery, anyway? It certainly doesn't appeal to me as a Christian pacifist who tries to confront militarism. Besides, all this language just builds up self-righteousness, which is very different from righteousness. There is a huge difference between a humble follower of Christ and someone who believes in conquering the world with the sword of the spirit.

At the same time, I definitely hear what you're saying about struggling against the authorities, the rulers, and the powers of the world rather than against flesh and blood. Struggling against flesh and blood means violence—people throw stones, other people blow themselves up in the hope of taking people with them, and still others force human beings out of their own homes. On an individual scale, struggling against flesh and blood is simply not loving your neighbor, and on a larger scale it can be racism, or even genocide.

Struggling against the powers that be, though, is absolutely necessary for followers of Christ. Speaking of wearing God's armor, dressing yourself for God's work, maybe what you mean is following God's call in everything—you could even call it conscience. And struggling against the authorities, or even just hurtful ideologies, certainly takes a firm anchor in God's word.

As many of you know, I was in Palestine for two weeks this summer, as a member of a Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation, and I had the opportunity to meet many people who exemplified this strength in God's truth. My delegation met Mordechai Vanunu on a rooftop café in Palestinian East Jerusalem. His story is long and sad—He is a Moroccan Jew by birth, but his family immigrated to Israel when he was young. He found himself in the Israeli Army, with a small mechanical job in a large top-secret factory. Gradually he realized that his factory was actually manufacturing nuclear weapons—so, disillusioned with Israel, he took pictures, converted to Christianity, went to London, and leaked the information, the whistleblower for the Israeli nuclear program. He was kidnapped by Israeli intelligence even before the story was published in the London Times, and he was sent back to Israel and put in solitary confinement for 11 years, and kept in jail for 7 years after that. He is now “free” to be in Israel, but is not allowed to move beyond its borders, not even to the Occupied Territories, despite having been offered amnesty by numerous countries—this, by the way, is a denial of human rights as outlined by international law. But on to the point of my story: despite 18 years in prison designed to rob him of his sanity and his health—and as he says, solitary confinement is the most effective way to brainwash a person—he emerged willing to talk, to resist, to fight for what is right. Now, he is boycotting Israel despite being trapped within the country, which means he never leaves East Jerusalem, a Palestinian area. He is sure that he conserved his eagerness to struggle by his acts of resistance while in prison, which included reading the New Testament in a loud voice for half an hour every day.

So, I suppose Mordechai Vanunu represents this armor of God—his security in what was right and his anchoring himself in God protected him through 18 years of imprisonment, and continues to keep him sane despite his ongoing confinement.

Our delegation went away from our meeting with Mordechai inspired and challenged. We met many other inspiring people over the next few days. There was a young man, Hazim, whose father was Palestinian but was out of the country at the start of the 1967 invasion and had his citizenship revoked. Hazim was working for the summer on a tourist visa at a refugee rights center, and he gave us the best lecture I have ever heard—fact after passionate fact, putting them together to show clearly Israel's racist expansionist militaristic policies, outlining what he

believed to be the only way to real Peace, that being the implementation of the refugee right of return. His breastplate of righteousness took the form of facts and of truth, of deep knowledge that justified his opinions and led him to act.

We also met the mayor of Beit Ummar, a pleasant and refined man, who told us the situations that led to his imprisonment. He was elected mayor by the people of his town, but Israel was convinced that the election was illegitimate and claimed that he was connected to Hamas, and so threw him in jail for 11 months as a new mayor was instituted in his place. Nevertheless, he continues to work for his community, especially advocating for the local orphanage. I found out on Friday that after we left, the orphanage was raided and computers and files confiscated—now they don't know where they will get the money to run the school for the year. He had a quiet anger, and combined with the deep love he had for his community, it was a powerful display of resolve through adversity toward justice and freedom. I haven't heard from him since the raids on the orphanage, but I suspect that under he continues to work for justice in his community with with a calm smile and quiet passion, the signs of his armor.

The delegation left our time in Jerusalem wishing we could be as strong in the truth as the people we had met, looking for our own armor for this situation. Luckily we soon went to Hebron, and not only did we get opportunities to use our Armor, we received a physical manifestation of it—the red CPT hat. These hats are well-known in Hebron. When we approach a checkpoint, soldiers often release the young men they have been detaining, and instead rack their brains for justifications to not let us through, or at least to display their control. As we walk by settlers, we get verbal threats and accusations, as well as the occasional egg or rock. From Palestinians, we get greetings and Middle-eastern-style welcome, shouted salutations as we walk down the street, even gifts of falafel or trinkets, and sometimes we receive simply somber nods of recognition. Anyone who sees CPT knows that they stand for Truth (we carry videocameras) and for human rights of all humans—which is why soldiers feel compelled to inform us that “Arabs are dogs.”

A real challenge when working as a peacemaker is to do everything with love. We want to respect people's opinions, but at the same time we must take a stand against violence and oppression. We oppose any time that a stone is thrown, by a settler or by a Palestinian, however much we might want to understand and even sympathize with the motives for throwing it. We oppose any conception of human beings as different from each other, one better than another. Though we oppose the authorities if conscience demands it, we also respect the laws that uphold human rights, and try to keep everyone aware of their own rights and of the rights of others. And as we build on these principles, always keeping the example of Jesus in mind, we tend to make friends on one side and, strange as it is to say, enemies on the other. We do not wish to have enemies, but there are people who disagree with us or distrust our motives, and who conceptualize us as their enemies. In Hebron these are the Jews who settled there, believing the city to be holier even than Jerusalem because it is the burial place of Abraham and Sarah. They have set up enclaves in the center of the city, in high buildings overlooking the markets, and their earnest desire is to see the Arabs out of the city of the patriarchs, to see it filled instead with Jews, God's chosen people. So they dump trash and dirty water onto the streets, they send their children to throw rocks at passersby, they take over buildings and valleys that have been abandoned by Palestinians tired of their continual harassment.

And it is hard to respond with love to these people, when they throw eggs at you, tell you to go home or call you “Nazi,” or even slap you across the face if you get too close, as happened to one CPTer. CPT's approach toward these people tends to be smiling, waving, saying “shalom,” all of which take a bit of a hard outer shell, or sometimes an oblivious demeanor. But when things get rough, we pull out the cameras and document the situation. That is harder to do with love, since the people we are filming perceive it as such a threat. In fact, some settlers have found CPT's policy of photography so annoying that they have taken to following CPT around

the city with videocameras of their own, though I don't know what they plan on doing with the footage.

These interactions hurt especially because we have no desire to be antagonistic to people as individuals—to flesh and blood. Our struggle is against the social norms and ideologies that accept and promote this behavior. And in that struggle, all we can use is love, with God's armor to keep us from hurting too much.

Our job as peacemakers is much clearer when we are confronted with the military, either at checkpoints or trying to stop us at demonstrations—for 2 reasons. First of all, soldiers represent the powers of the world, not flesh and blood. Secondly, they are indoctrinated to not bring their personal side to their work. So there are many things we can do, including forcing them to confront what they as human beings are doing to Palestinians as human beings, and also informing them of our rights and of the rights of Palestinians, since the soldiers do not always know of or remember these rights—as in the case of a soldier shooting a bound and blindfolded Palestinian in the foot the other day. Just bringing personal, conscious attention to what soldiers are doing, forcing them to think about their own actions, can really help. I recall one time, as we were passing through the most difficult checkpoint in Hebron, there was a new batch of soldiers who wasn't yet familiar with CPT's mission. A soldier asked "What are you doing here?" John, a veteran CPTer, said "Trying to reduce the level of violence." "So are we," said the soldier, and extended his hand, and it is true that soldiers believe that they are helping bring security to Hebron. "Well," John said, shaking the proffered hand, "it would help if you didn't have a gun."

So, Paul, I suppose you had something going, even though I still am uncomfortable with your violent imagery. I don't want to wear physical armor at all, because it represents an expectation that I will be attacked physically which is not something I wish to believe or to signal to others. But spiritual armor is a different thing. Having a firm anchor in God, following a calling to justice and truth, requires some protection and preparation. It is easy to be persuaded to fight against people, and to consider them your enemies, but with the mental and spiritual armor of God, we can be more successful at loving them, trying to help them past their bigotry rather than struggling against them in a way that enforces it.