

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
Thomas G. Speers, III  
August 26, 2018  
Ordinary 21--“Dress Ups”

Lessons: Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Do you remember playing dress ups? We used to have a trunk that was filled with all kinds of clothing and when they were younger, certain people in our household might appear in the bright colors and fancy jewels of a princess or the rugged costume of Robin Hood or a Major League baseball player or ballerina or even Harry Potter. They came by this naturally. My own family has a long history of dressing up in some of the most outlandish costumes. You’ve seen me appear here in a kilt and a cut-away. When my brother studied at Oxford, we met his returning plane at the airport, all of us wearing academic regalia; he considered not getting off the plane. We used to spend part of every summer visiting my great grandmother in Elizabethtown, New York, in the Adirondacks. We stayed in the house that had been built by my three times great grandfather and it was filled with treasures including unbelievable closets of clothing, including, I later discovered, a dress that was worn by my great great great grandmother to the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln. And dress ups were not a thing for children only. The adults loved to play as well. When my mother’s younger sister Serena brought her fiancée to visit Elizabethtown for the first time, poor Uncle Jerry arrived to discover his soon to be in-laws, dressed in the top hats, frock coats, and long dresses of another age. Thankfully he did not turn tail and run away.

Today we are invited in the words of Paul to play dress ups. “Put on the whole armor of God,” Paul writes to the Ephesians, “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 armor 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.” Dress up.

The language Paul uses today reminds me of a hymn that we will sing today, a hymn that is not included in many hymnals today, Onward Christian Soldiers. I can understand why we don’t sing it very much anymore and why it isn’t in many hymnals. In a world filled with too much religious strife and much too much violence, I don’t think it usually hits the right chord. And yet, if you sing through the eyes of Paul, it might just work.

Tom Long had an experience with this hymn. He was worshipping in a small Methodist church in Maryland during one summer. On a good Sunday there were about two-dozen people. “This church was once a gathering place for a vibrant farming and fishing community, a place of summer revivals and ice cream socials, a place to chat under the live oak trees and maybe find a spouse. Now the congregation is aging, and each funeral brings yet another aching emptiness to once-filled pews.” Long doesn’t particularly like this hymn, so when he realized that Onward Christian Soldiers was the opening hymn, he groaned. “But then we sang it, all 20 of us. The irony of the moment caught me off guard. There we were, most of us graying, some infirm, a hearing aid or two whistling in the background, singing, “Like a mighty army moves the church of God.” If it hadn’t been worship, I might have laughed out loud. Instead I teared up. There we were, a gaggle of Methodists and their

two Presbyterian interlopers singing, “We are not divided, all one body we,” just after both of our communions had held rancorous, divisive denominational meetings.

“There was a gospel truth here. Only in a place like this—a place where “Onward Christian Soldiers” was not a display of militarism but just patently ridiculous—could that hymn speak truth. Faithful worship is deeply ironic. Instead of the words “Enter to Worship, Depart to Serve,” perhaps our bulletins should say, “Warning: Every word of the service to follow is absurd, to be uttered only in faith.” “I believe in the holy catholic church”? Absurd. “Praise God from whom all blessings flow”? Absurd. “Like a mighty army, moves the church of God”? You must be kidding.

“If the church loses this sense of absurdity and starts believing it really is some kind of army with sufficient strength to swat down our enemies and exert our will, then our worship becomes idolatry and our life demonic. But when we realize that what we say in worship can be true only in the improbable reign of God, we regain our souls and sound the trumpet, this time for an army that marshals no troops but the frail saints, bears no arms but the sword of the Spirit, makes no advance except that of love and has no enemy but that which undermines God’s hope for human flourishing.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul’s call today is not suggesting that we invest in new weapons systems as we face the evil that is absolutely present in the world today. The dress ups that he suggests are all of God’s making. This armor is a gift from God; it is deep inside. We can’t make it ourselves.

So much of our lives are spent trying to protect ourselves from those cosmic powers that surround us. We eat well and exercise to protect ourselves from a multitude of medical problems. Yet too often the healthiest among us end up facing the most difficult diseases. We spend time and energy and money on our children so that they can prosper. Yet even in the best of families, those kids sometimes go horribly astray and we can’t defend them. We can try to protect ourselves in all kinds of ways, spending hours constructing our own armor and it will never be enough. Yet, in the same way that I discovered that amazing closet in Elizabethtown, there is an even better and more exciting closet in God’s house; it is filled with clothes from God that will protect us; they are spun with thread from heaven. You can discover them in prayer and by spending time in worship. You will find them hanging in run down and well to do churches wherever faithful people proclaim the love of God for all the world. You will find them worn by those who help the suffering and support the weak. Wherever the gospel is lived, there you will find these special clothes.

Matt Fitzgerald is a minister in Chicago who describes a photograph of three people wearing these new clothes from God: “In *Parting the Waters*, the first volume of Taylor Branch’s history of the civil rights movement, there is a shocking photo of a lunch counter in Nashville. A white man and a white woman are sitting with an African-American woman. Their backs are turned on an angry mob gathered behind them. Their waiter has just poured a bottle of ketchup over the white man’s head. In the black and white photograph, the ketchup looks like blood as it drips down the man’s jacket. His jaw is clenched, his shoulders braced. He must want nothing more than to turn and attack the jeering crowd, to pick up a sword and wade into battle. But he sits still. On the world’s terms he is weak; armed with nothing but the gospel of peace, he receives every sort of abuse. The difficult thing about Christian armor is that it lets more in than it keeps out.

“The eyes of the crowd are insane, lit up by the cosmic powers of that dark time. One man has a sugar jar in his hand and a joyful smile on his face as he pours its contents over the African-American protester’s head. A middle-aged man above him looks on approvingly. But to their right, at the far edge of the photo’s boundary, there is a member of the mob who looks ashamed of this ugly scene. He is a young man with his eyes downcast, his face tormented. He appears to be in pain.

“It seems obvious that the young man walked through the doors of that restaurant ready to attack, or at least to cheer on some violence. If one of the protesters had carried anything but God’s

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Absurd in Worship*, in *The Christian Century*, August 13, 2012. Vol. 129. No. 17. © 2012.

weapons, I imagine he would have fought back with pleasure. But his weapons proved no match for the armor of God; indeed, the photo caught the precise instant when some part of him was killed—not just slain in the spirit but slain by the Spirit, splayed wide open by the power of love. I doubt that those three protesters felt triumphant when they returned to their living quarters to shower and wash off the day's trauma. More often than not, God's victories emerge years later. They are difficult in the moment, and beautiful only in retrospect. But there is great beauty in that photo. The armor of God is shining brightly. Though the flaming arrows rage, grace will win. As Ephesians promises, it always does."<sup>2</sup>

Whatever comes your way, remember this: grace wins. In a world that too often is brutal and broken, where nasty words too often are hurled, God has a whole new outfit for us to wear. Put on God's clothes and stand tall.

Let us pray: Loving God, amidst all that would keep us from being fully ourselves, give us the strength to stand tall as your messengers in the world. Clothe us with your truth, your righteousness and your peace. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Matt Fitzgerald, The Armor of God: Ephesians 6:10-20 in The Christian Century, August 11, 2009. Vol. 126. No. 16. © 2009.