

Ephesians 6:10-20  
Is This the Hill?  
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\*Title Slide

Francois Scarborough Clemons was born April 23, 1945, in Birmingham Alabama. At the age of 10, he was already the choir director at his church. He shared his musical gifts, especially his love for pre-Civil War spirituals, with audiences all over his hometown and beyond. His repertoire wasn't limited to just one genre though, in fact, at one point, he was the lead singer for a rock n roll band called the Jokers. Throughout his long career he was a singer, actor, playwright, and director. He is a gay, African-American man, born in a time when it was hard to be one of those, let alone both. He is a remarkable man for many reasons.

\*But, if you are a fan of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, you probably know him as Officer Clemmons.

His place in Mister Rogers' Neighborhood was groundbreaking. Not only was he a beloved neighbor, but he was an authority figure in the Neighborhood at a time when it was unusual for people of color to be in positions of authority, certainly it was unusual on television. In a Story Corps interview about his time on Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, Clemons said, "Fred came to me and said, 'I have this idea, you could be a police officer.' That kind of stopped me in my tracks. I grew up in the ghetto. I did not have a positive opinion of police officers.

Policemen were sicking police dogs and water hoses on people. And I really had a hard time putting myself in that role. So, I was not excited about being Officer Clemons at all." He did it anyway, for 25 years, because he loved and trusted Fred Rogers and he believed in the work they were doing.

\*In 1969, on one especially hot day in the Neighborhood, Officer Clemons stopped by to see Mister Rogers and found him cooling off by soaking his feet in a backyard baby pool. In what has become an iconic moment, Mister Rogers invited Officer Clemons to join him, to put his feet in the pool alongside his. Today, this small gesture may seem insignificant, but in 1969, it was a big deal. Like public water fountains, buses, and public schools, public pools had become a battleground of racial segregation. Under Jim Crow era policy, not only could black people and white people not swim at the same time, many pools were entirely off limits to black people, fueled by fear and lies about public health concerns.

But in Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, a quiet Presbyterian minister and an black police officer demonstrated to the world that integration was beautiful and possible, and really pretty simple. As Officer Clemons slipped his feet into the pool, the camera held the shot for several seconds, as if to make the point clear: a pair of brown feet and a pair of white feet were really sharing a swimming pool. Nearly 25 years later, Mister Rogers and Officer Clemons reenacted that moment. A much older Mister Rogers and Officer Clemons sat with their feet in a similar blue wading pool, talking about the ways in which we express love, from singing to cleaning up a room to drawing special pictures to making plays. The scene ended with Mister Rogers taking a towel and helping Officer Clemons dry his feet, saying, "Here, let me help you."

\* <https://vimeo.com/141427439>

I loved watching Mister Rogers and his friends in the Neighborhood when I was a child, but it wasn't until I grew up that I realized how important his work was. He stood up for what he believed in. It isn't hard to see how his faith inspired his work. Fred Rogers took seriously the scripture mandate to care for the most vulnerable. He worked with prisons to create child-friendly spaces for family visitation, sat on

hospital boards to minimize trauma in children's health care, visited people who were sick and dying, and wrote countless letters to the lonely. His legacy lives on. Last year about this time, his wife Joanne was interviewed by television anchor Meghan Kelly. In that interview, she was asked what Fred would have to say to America in 2018. She said, "It would be about the children. It would be about the immigrants who are having children taken—the children themselves. It breaks my heart, and I know it breaks everybody's heart." Mister Rogers stood up for what he believed in, he stood up for people.

Mister Rogers didn't do that by protesting, rallying, and organizing. He stood up for what was right by demonstrating positive relationships, by inviting, sharing, playing, singing, and loving. In fact, the Neighborhood he created for his young viewers was an "in the flesh" metaphor for a just, peaceful, world, where everyone was valued and love was lived---in so many ways.

In today's text, we are presented with a metaphor as well. This one was used by the writer to teach the original readers how to live as Christians in a world that was decidedly not Christian. It reflects both the early Christian understanding of and rejection of military might and warfare.

\*This is Ephesians 6:10-17:

<sup>10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. <sup>11</sup> Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. <sup>15</sup> As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

This text enjoys what Disciples minister Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock called, “the power of the familiar.” In other words, many of us recognize it and the images it brings to mind are firmly imprinted in our memories. Those images, though, might tempt us to disregard or minimize the importance of our text this morning, casting it off as irrelevant.

\*After all, 21<sup>st</sup> century soldiers don’t look like this anymore. So, what can this seemingly out of date metaphor have to say to us in a world that has exchanged armor for camouflage and swords for automatic weapons, missiles and drones?

\*The soldiers of today may dress differently and have different weapons, but in some respects, not that much has changed. The predominantly pagan world of the Roman Empire, sadly like the 21<sup>st</sup> century world of today, was built on militarism. Human beings use weapons, warfare, and violence to take power and stay in power, to get our way and force others to do what we want them to do. This text tells us there is another way. We were not made to wage war against human beings, but to wage war against our true enemy, sin, which the author of Ephesians metaphorically identifies as the “devil” or the “evil one.”

Theologically, if this message was understood and taken to heart, Christians would be exemplary peacemakers. But our history betrays us. It reveals violence in which the rhetoric of spiritual warfare against sin became literal warfare. Early Christians, at times, were persecuted and we know many died as martyrs. But by the year 325, when it was legal to be a Christian, Christians began persecuting other Christians. In the process of establishing standards of our faith, orthodox Christians brutally punished the Christians they identified as heretics. Christians

accused one another of being “tools of the devil” because they had different understandings of the person and nature of Christ.

In medieval crusades, European Christian soldiers slaughtered Jews, Muslims, and heretics (Eastern Christians), claiming they were killing the forces of evil. You know, “onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war...” Fast forward to the Protestant Reformers who approved the state right of execution of those whom the church perceived as “enemies of God,” Turks, Jews, Christian heretics, and witches. Later, Christian Europe justified the conquest, colonization, and forced conversion of those, in their words, “dark savages” of the Americas, as well as the enslavement of Asians and Africans using similar rhetoric. According to historian Kathleen E. McVey, the Church’s three basic positions about war---pacifism, just war, and holy war, are all based on various interpretations of spiritual warfare against the powers of “this present darkness,” yet two of those positions rely, not on God’s strength and power, but on the same militarism that the first Jesus communities rejected.

It’s important for us to understand and to dispel any illusion that we may have about our shared history as Christians. Clearly, we cannot accurately claim a history of peace and especially we cannot use that false narrative to point our finger at the history of other faith traditions, like that of our Muslim brothers and sisters as if they have “lived by the sword” and we have not. That is simply not true. The message to the Ephesians (and to us) is clear. In the middle of a world that is fiercely fighting, Christians are called to be the ones bringing the good news of peace and “the whole armor of God,” which is designed for protection, not as a weapon. In fact, the only offensive gear we are to have is the “sword of the Spirit,” which, in the metaphor, is the word of God. In Ephesians, the author attempted to transform the all too common images of militaristic warfare into new Christian terms of spiritual

warfare, which rely on our faith...that the ways of peace Jesus proclaimed provide a way forward that violence and war does not.

We haven't really embraced this metaphor, though, in spite of the heroes of our faith who have shown us the way. Jesus himself lampooned Roman military might as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, rather than a war horse. The kin-dom of God he talked about was ruled by a loving, just God, not by a king with troops at his command. Fred Rogers was one of those heroes too, demonstrating to children and to the rest of us, that standing up for what is right

\*looks like this

\*and this

\*and this.

Today's text tells us to "stand against the wiles of the devil," to stand up in the face of injustice and sin. I think we have a lot of choices about how we do that, but I don't think there is much wiggle room with regard to whether or not we will do that. Over and over again, scripture reminds us of our responsibility to be the bearers of the ways of God in the world, to be the ones saying to the world, "No, this isn't the way it is supposed to be."

On July 5<sup>th</sup>, as we recovered from our celebrations of Independence Day, I saw this cartoon on Facebook.

\*One person says to the other, "So, have you decided on your Independence Day resolutions yet? The second person says, "My...what?"

The first person answers, "You know...like what specific injustices do you plan to rebel against in the coming year?"

\*What if I posed that question to each of us individually and to all of us collectively? Maybe I will.

*What specific injustices do you plan to rebel against in the coming year and how can the church help?*

God has given us the spirit of truth, justice, peace, courage, and love to protect us, like armor, from apathy, frustration, fear, and indecision. And we have been “armed” with voices to proclaim the ways of God and hopefully the inspiration to act, to stand for what is right in our own unique ways. Every bit of resistance counts, even when it doesn’t seem like anyone notices or like it is ever going to make a difference. Do it or say it anyway.

I will be honest, the image of a soldier in armor does nothing to remind me of the ways of God and the ways in which the spirit of God equips us for service to the world. And it does nothing to inspire me to in this work when I am weary and frustrated. If that is true for you, you might consider spending some time reflecting on what image would be helpful. I did that this week, without settling on any one image.

\*I meditated on photos of some of my faith heroes, symbols of peace, our denomination, and even images of communion tables. All of them gave me inspiration and reminded me I am not alone in this work. I would love to know what images come to mind for you if the iron-clad soldier doesn’t work for you.

In the meantime, I will end with a reminder that sometimes standing up for what we believe in is as simple as being present. This week is a time when our brothers and sisters in the LGBTQ+ community in Bartlesville need us to show up for them, at the

- \*Pride Community Worship service,
- \*the Movie Night, and of course,
- \*the picnic.

Our neighbors need us to show them there is room at every single table for them to be exactly as God created them. I hope you will join me in doing just that. Amen.