

“Stand Firm”

Ephesians 6:10-20

Twelve of us from Divinity experienced the 3 B’s of Dixieland music last June. Broadway, Beale, and Bourbon Streets.

Honky Tonk Country music coming out of every establishment 7 days a week from noon to 2 a.m. along Broadway in Nashville where there are so many starving musicians often playing for tips. The hot chicken is pretty incredible.

No traffic is allowed on Beale St. with large, blue, neon signs arching over each end of the street. Peeking in the doors, you’ll probably see and hear a black drummer and guitarist playing and occasionally singing the Memphis Blues. With the help of Elvis Presley living at Graceland on the edge of the city, we white folks began to appreciate the blues as the gateway to rock-n-roll.

After Graceland, the most visited and spirit-filled site in Memphis is standing on the front lawn looking up to the hotel balcony where 50 years ago on April 4, 1968, a bullet robbed us of one of the great human-rights leaders of the 20th century. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. accelerated the racist backlash of the 1960’s.

Along with the murder of Robert F. Kennedy two months later, this tragic trajectory led to the election of Richard Nixon, who escalated the Viet Nam War and unleashed police and FBI forces against movements for change. Fifty years later, Memphis remains an epicenter for social change. “Fight for \$15” organizers met there picketing McDonalds and marching on the anniversary of the Memphis sanitation workers strike. The American Federation of State,

County, and Municipal Employees met there and launched its “I Am 2018” campaign to fight for racial and economic justice. The bonds of memory cannot so easily be dissolved.

Some in our Divinity group spent 4 hours walking through the Civil Rights Museum next to the hotel where King was assassinated ending up in the hotel room he was staying in.

Martin Luther King stood firm in the face of persecution. His faith in Christ gave him the strength and power to stand firm for civil rights.

In our second lesson from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians he writes in verse 10, “Be strong in the Lord and the strength of his power”.

Be strong in the Lord when evil comes your way, be strong in the Lord when evil comes my way in the form of temptation, doubt, and persecution. Be prepared with defensive weapons when we are tempted, when we are in doubt, when we are defending our faith in Christ, when we are fighting for racial and economic justice.

Paul uses the image of a Roman soldier’s battle dress when he says in verse 11, “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil”.

In verse 12, Paul reminds his churches that the real threat to their physical and spiritual safety isn’t the “enemies of blood and flesh” but the “rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers”.

What do we do? Verse 13 – “Take up the whole armor of God, so that you will be able to withstand on that evil day and having done everything, to stand firm”.

Paul then goes on to list several weapons of the Roman armor as metaphors for the kind of everyday carry items the church should always have at hand individually and collectively. With the exception of the sword, all of these are defensive weapons, designed for protection.

As we talk about each of these defensive weapons, think not only in terms of defending our faith, but also how these characteristics can help in our relationships with one another, especially our marriage relationships. Whether we are newlyweds as Andrew and Mallory Kronenberger were married yesterday or veterans as Russ and Delila Rodgers are celebrating 50 years of marriage, we all need the armor of God to “be strong in the Lord and the strength of his power”.

Verse 14 – “Fasten the belt of truth around your waist”. Russ and Delila have been speaking the truth to one another much longer than 50 years because they met at Pleasant Valley Jr. High when she was a 7th grader and he an 8th grader. Because her father worked the second shift and her mom liked Russ, even though her father said, “no dating”, her mom let them go out as long as they were home by 11 and dad got home at 12:30. Having no secrets is the key to wearing the belt of truth, except for when you’re making up an excuse to come and visit the pastor.

Verse 14 – “Put on the breastplate of righteousness”.

Andrew and Mallory did it right yesterday. Russ and Delila did it right on August 24, 1968 at the Cleveland Baptist Church on Tiedemann. Russ did it right by having his brother Ron as the best man and Delila had her best friend, Pat Piper as the matron of honor. Russ did it right by working 41 years in construction, the last 31 years operating cranes. Meanwhile Delila was giving birth to son Robert and daughter Heather. You’re doing it right when you make decisions together except when Russ went out and bought a second trophy cabinet for his model cranes.

Delila asked the same question many husbands are asked when we buy something on our own. “Where are you gonna put that?” The breastplate of righteousness protects our hearts by giving us a deep sense of what’s right and wrong.

Verse 15 – “As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace”.

Russ finds peace in taking off his shoes and resting in one of his 3 easy chairs in the basement, living room, and patio. Delila gets 1 easy chair on the enclosed patio where they spend summer and fall evenings together. The bed is another place to rest and find peace until you have to get up in the middle of the night and she asks, “Why are you getting out of bed?” There have been more questions since Russ’ heart attack. Experiencing the peace of Christ barefoot after so many years of wearing work boots can help us in preparing to share the gospel of peace with others.

Verse 16 – “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”.

Two people are stronger than one. Roman shields were best employed in a phalanx, which provided mutual protection against attack, particularly from arrows. The shields were often covered with leather, which was soaked in water before battle to extinguish flaming arrows fired by enemy archers.

Keeping the faith involves the cohesion of Christians together in a community of mutual support, instruction, and accountability. That’s one of the reasons we gather together as the church. There is strength in numbers as we worship and work together, watch out for one another and God’s people everywhere.

When the building trades went on strike in the 1970's, it meant receiving food stamps, taking odd jobs, and being frugal. Supporting one another during the hard times, helps us appreciate and give thanks for the good times.

Verse 17 – “Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”.

It is necessary to wear a helmet on the job site or wish we had a helmet when our wives are throwing dog toys around the room with little accuracy. Fostering golden retrievers or having 7 cats in the house at one time is the sacrifice for Delila's volunteering at the Parma Animal Shelter and her love for animals.

“The sword of the Spirit”, the Word of God brought you to Divinity. We all benefit from Delila's baking and cooking with lots of sugar and butter. Both of them helping to create the best nut rolls in Buckeye-land, helping at the Redeemer Crisis Center, painting, greeting, maintaining the courtyard, repairing our classroom curtains, and today celebrating 50 years of marriage.

Whether it was Martin Luther King standing firm in the face of persecution or Paul standing firm when the first Christians were persecuted, or us standing firm in all of our relationships, we can heed Russ's advice when he told me that this is what it takes to stay together on this roller coaster ride from birth to death.

He said, “Be a great companion, caring, loving, and ready to help out anyone. That is why she has put up with me for 50 years”.

May the peace of God . . .

#631 – Love Divine, All Loves Excelling