

Paul is gathering the troops this morning. He's issuing a loud, clear rally cry: Put on your armor so that you can make your stand. Before he's done, Paul is going to say it three more times. "Stand your ground." "Do everything possible so that, after everything is done, you're still standing." "Stand with the belt of truth around your waist." Stand, stand, stand, stand. If you didn't know any better, you might think Paul is huddled up with the starting defensive line for the Patriots. Or that he is General Eisenhower giving final instructions to the infantry before they make their march across the field to meet the enemy. Except Paul isn't a general, and the troops aren't soldiers. Paul, we are told, back in the first pages of the book of Ephesians, is an apostle of Jesus by the will of God. This is Paul's calling card. It says who he is. As an apostle, he is a messenger. He speaks for Jesus, and he does so by the will of God. If you're Paul, this is the only way it can work. For we know there was a time when Paul stood in the world against Jesus, against his compassion, against his mercy, against his radical and cosmic acceptance of all people. That he now stands in the world as a representative of Jesus, it has to be by the will of God. It's the only explanation for how a guy like Paul has come to be huddled up with the church of Jesus. Which is who Paul is calling upon this morning. He's calling upon the church of Jesus, upon us. To stand our ground against evil.

We must be careful though, because, let's be honest, this is a powerful call. Powerful because it has all the imagery of a great crusade, with a thousand knights of armor, riding across the face of the earth, swords drawn, Jesus in the lead and the enemy on the run. Throughout history, some—and this includes many church traditions—some have painted Jesus this way: as a mighty warrior come to beat the world into submission. As lord of the manor, who loves his subjects so long as they are obedient and loving in return.

I grew up in a church tradition that taught something like this, where the pervasive understanding of Jesus was that he had come not to punish me, but to save me from punishment. I got to tell you though, many years later, and now a parent, and I have come to find that these two things are not all that different from one another, and that truly, the threat of punishment is actually far more powerful—and terrifying—than punishment itself. Which is why I think you can walk into some churches and get the feeling that the

people inside are trying to win you over with Jesus. Every sermon is a sermon about sin, and every sermon ends with an altar call to turn your life over to Jesus. It's not unlike the church sign I saw once that read: "Will you be spending eternity smoking or non-smoking? We are smoke free inside." In other words, the threat is real, but come to us, we'll protect you, we've got Jesus. Without us it could be an eternity in the smoking section for you.

Or the woman I know who was baptized as a baby and then baptized again as an adult. "I know I didn't need to," she told me. "I know what I believe, that baptism isn't about what I do but about what God does."

"And what's that?" I asked her.

"That God loves me and God's love never changes."

"So if God's love is as good now as it's ever been, why did you get baptized again?"

"Well, the church I'm going to now says I need to be baptized by them."

When Paul says to stand against the tricks of the devil, he knows what he's talking about. That the greatest trick the Devil's ever played is making us think that there's something more we have to do to make God love us.

"You don't have to do anything more. You don't have to do anything at all. Just stand, Paul says. Don't move. Don't go about working at it. And don't try and tell anyone else that they have to work at it either. Either love has no sides or it's not love. So just stand up in the world and live as you are—fully loved, fully accepted, fully forgiven."

It's the hardest thing we'll ever have to do, and the hardest thing the church will ever have to do. Because we've been so trained to think that the solution to evil in the world is simply to route it out, so we can contain it, and destroy it. But this of course requires that we first name the evil, and who among is going to raise their hand and say they are capable of always knowing the difference between good and evil? Yet collectively, this is what we do. We create penal systems that incarcerate blacks at significantly higher rates than whites and that incarcerate all criminals twice as fast as we rehabilitate them. We adopt political rhetoric that marginalizes the already marginalized. We participate in economic systems that reward those who can get ahead at the expense of those who have no chance of ever even catching up. We allow our churches to be places of competitive belonging rather than cosmic belonging.

Just stand in the world exactly as you are, says Paul. Which means allowing others to stand in the world exactly as they are. It's the hardest thing we'll ever have to do, and the hardest thing the church will ever have to do. Because the world *is* dangerous. Full of crime and hatred, prejudice and discrimination, anger and poverty, war, and worse, cynicism. It's not like Paul is ignoring this fact. He's writing his letter to the church at Ephesus from a prison cell, where he's locked up on account of having invited some non-Jews to come to worship with him. For the crime of showing hospitality to strangers in church, a riot broke out among the other church members, and the authorities, not wanting any trouble, put Paul behind bars. Now he's standing on his tippy toes, trying to get as close to his one tiny window as he can, hoping someone on the outside will hear what he has to say.

What he does say is as telling as what he doesn't say. He doesn't shout violence into the streets, he doesn't call his accusers liars, he doesn't blame the media for impartial coverage, he doesn't demonize his opposition. He says, "Stand in the world as you are. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood anyway." Of course we want to say, "How can Paul say that? Our struggle isn't against flesh and blood. It's not like you put yourself in prison, Paul. It's not like some ghost pulled the trigger on all those children in all those schools. It's not some figment of my imagination that committed genocide against 1 million Jews and then 800,000 Rwandans. It wasn't some spirit that drove that car drunk right off the road." It sounds like Paul is saying, live and let live. But what if it's too late for that? What if the damage has already been done? I mean, sometimes you turn the other cheek and the world slaps that too. What's left?

The late, great child psychologist Alice Miller offers us an alternative in becoming what she calls "enlightened witnesses." Miller, who spent her professional life working with abused and tormented children, wrote that so often victims of abuse grow up to become perpetrators of abuse. Children of alcoholic parents grow up to become alcoholics themselves. Because it's the only world we know, and it's full of guilt and shame. Only when someone steps into our lives to take the stand and offer a different narrative in our defense can we begin to see ourselves as something else.

Many of you know that I'm a great fan and student of Greg Boyle, the Jesuit priest who works with inner city gangs in L.A. and who started Homeboy Industries as a way of

helping gang members get jobs and get off the streets. In one of his more recent interviews he tells a story about a young man named Jose who is in his early 20s, is a former gang member, a recovering heroin addict, and now part of the Homeboy Industries team.

“I guess you could say that my mom and me, we didn’t get along so good. I guess I was six when she looked at me and said, ‘Why don’t you just kill yourself? You’re such a burden to me.’

I was 9 when my mom drove me down to the deepest part of Baja, California and walked me up to an orphanage and said, “I found this kid.” It took 90 days before my grandmother could get out of her where she dumped him and she came and rescued me.

My mom beat me every day. In fact, I wore 3 tee-shirts every day to school to hide my wounds. I wore 3 tee shirts well into my adult years because I was ashamed of my wounds. I didn’t want anyone to see them. But now I welcome my wounds. I run my fingers over my wounds. My wounds are my friends. For how can I help the wounded if I don’t welcome my own wounds?”¹

In writing to the church, Paul calls us to put on the armor of God and take up our weapons. Why? Because the world is a dangerous place. Full of evil. The irony, however, is that never will the world stop being dangerous until we put our weapons down, until we take off the armor we’ve been wearing to protect ourselves from one another and trade up for the armor God—the armor of truth, the armor of faith and peace. So that we can take our stand in the world as those who have only love to give.

Amen.

¹ From his November 22, 2017 with Krista Tippett in “*On Being*.”

