

First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“The Right Kind of Uniform for the Life of Christian Faith”

Psalm 84
Ephesians 6:10 – 20

November 15, 2015

Every once in a while, I'll be out in the village somewhere, buying groceries, or filling the car with gas, or eating in some restaurant... and I'll run into someone who'll say something like this: *“Oh! Pastor Rick! It's you! I didn't recognize you without your robe!”*

And, I know just what they mean. They're used to seeing me *here*, in church, up in the pulpit wearing this black robe... and when they see me dressed like a slob, in my worn-out sweatshirt and faded blue jeans, it takes them a beat to connect the dots and realize *“Hey! That's not just any old slob, that slob's my pastor!”*

And the same thing happens to me sometimes, when I go to watch our church kids at their various ball games and sporting events. I'm so used to seeing the kids here, at church, all dressed up in their Sunday morning clothes, that when I see them out on the field, wearing their hats, and pads, and helmets, and uniforms... it often takes me a while to figure out which kids I'm supposed to be paying attention to!

This was especially true earlier this year, when I traveled to Sag Harbor to watch Meredith Spolarich play in a softball game. When I got to the field, I realized that I didn't know which team Meredith played for; so, I went over to the first-base side, where one of the teams was warming up, and I carefully looked at every kid on that field... and realized that, as far as my fading eyesight could tell, none of them was Meredith.

“Ah,” I said to myself, *“she must be on the other team!”* So, I moved over to the third-base bleachers, near where the other team was warming up, to try to pick Meredith out of *that* crowd of girls. But after about ten minutes of squinting, and shading my eyes, and searching for some sign of recognition, I realized that Meredith wasn't on that team, either!

“Well, she must have been with that first bunch of girls, but I just didn't recognize her in her softball hat and uniform,” I said so myself; so, I moved back to the first-base bleachers and started the whole process over again. And this went on for the better part of half an hour; but, for the life of me, I could **not** tell which one of those girls was Meredith Spolarich!

So, by now I'm not only embarrassed, because I can't recognize one of our own church kids; but I'm also getting nervous, figuring that every parent, grandparent, sibling, and family friend at that softball field is wondering, *“Who's the middle-aged idiot going around looking at all these young girls?”*

Anyway, I figured that it was probably time to give up on the softball game, so, with much shame and mortification, I trudged back to the parking lot to my car. When, who should come driving up at that very moment, but **Kim** Spolarich, Meredith's mom! Who told me that Meredith had injured her hand earlier in the day... and she wasn't even *at* the game! Well, no wonder I

couldn't find her! But even if she'd been out on that field, chances are it would have taken me a few minutes to pick her out... because I'm just not used to seeing her in her softball uniform.

And the point that I want to make with all this, is that there's a proper "uniform" for pretty much everything we do, right? There's a certain style of attire that's appropriate for whatever vocation, avocation, hobby, activity, or daily duty we happen to be involved with.

If we see TV news coverage of a fire, it's easy to tell who the firefighters are, by the way they're dressed. If we drive past a bit of highway construction, we can quickly tell who the workers are, by their hardhats, orange vests, and heavy-duty work boots. When I go to Chase to deposit my paycheck, I can tell who the bank employees are by their blue shirts and nametags. Hey, when Ed Dressler walked into our Christian Education meeting on Thursday, and I asked him if he'd had to work that day... he pointed to his sport coat and said, yes, that's why he was wearing his work "uniform." So, even managing the store at London Jewelers requires a certain style of dress!

And that's just the way it is. You'll never see the New York Yankees... wearing the uniforms of the Boston Red Sox. You'll never see Ronald McDonald... dressed up like Hannibal Lecter. You'll never see an airline pilot wearing a parachute... as he welcomes you aboard the plane. You'll never see a soldier heading into battle... dressed like the Maytag Repair Man.

It's not *always* the case, but most of the time, there's a certain look... that goes with a certain calling. There's a special kind of dress... that makes sense for a particular kind of vocation. There's a proper uniform... that fits with the task at hand. And the question that I want for us to consider this morning is, what's the right kind of uniform for the life of Christian faith? If preachers wear black robes, and doctors wear white lab coats, and soldiers wear battle dress uniforms... what's a Christian disciple supposed to wear, as he or she goes about the business of living out the life of faith?

It may seem like a silly question, but, really, it's not. Because according to Paul the Apostle in our lesson today from his letter to the Ephesians, the Christian life requires a very special kind of "uniform..." being a person of faith calls for a specific style of dress that's fitting for the challenges which we must face. And Paul's not talking here about "how to dress for church!" He's not offering commentary on whether or not men should wear jackets and ties, or whether it's okay for women to wear pants, or if it's a scandal for kids to wear flip-flops to Sunday school.

No, Paul uses the imagery of an ancient suit of armor... in order to describe how we Christians should gird ourselves; how we should prepare ourselves; in order to successfully live out our faith in a world that's frequently hostile to the message of the gospel, and the hope and joy which it can bring.

So, looking again at our text, Paul reminds us that there's more going on in the living of our faith than just what we can see with our eyes, and hear with our ears, and touch with our fingers. It's true that we live the Christian life in the day-to-day real world of work, and school, and bills to pay, and meals to prepare, and kids activities, and a hundred other important workaday enterprises.

But it's also true that there's a spiritual dimension to our lives; a dimension of faith, and truth, and values, and meaning. A dimension of godliness, and holiness, and seeking to follow God's leading in the midst of all the howling distractions which are constantly crowding around us. A dimension of trying to embrace that which is good... while at the same time trying to renounce and avoid that which is evil; both the personal kind of evil, that affects me as an

individual... and the bigger-picture kind of evil, that somehow causes people to believe that they're making God happy by blowing up a restaurant full of innocent people.

And we live as Christians in these two dimensions of life at the same time, of course; we serve the Lord, and do His will, and try grow in faith and godliness... even as we carry out all our responsibilities at home, and at work, and at school, and out there in the community. But Paul's main interest in our text has to do with that part of our life of faith that's beyond the mundane and day-to-day. And so he tells us that, "*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*"

In other words, Paul is reminding us not to become so distracted by all the superficial stuff that occupies so much of our time and attention, that we lose track of the deeper matters of life and faith... and, especially, he says, those matters which have the power to damage our souls, and derail our life with the Lord. And the way in which he challenges us to keep our faith-life properly in focus... is by wearing the right kind of "uniform" as we live out our Christian convictions.

And, according to Paul, how should we "dress" ourselves; how should we "clothe" ourselves; how should we prepare ourselves; if we would live successfully as Christian disciples in both the physical and spiritual dimensions of our life?

Well, by dressing ourselves for battle. By clothing ourselves, as Paul says, "*in the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, [we] may be able to stand [y]our ground, and after [we] have done everything, to stand.*" And then Paul goes on to give us a description of just what this "full armor of God" looks like:

"Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish 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."

Let's see... seek, and stand upon, the **truth**; make personal **righteousness** a priority (and not self-righteousness or "holier than thou-ism," but the humble and gracious kind of righteousness that comes from God); always be **ready** to pursue the gospel, or "good news" of God's peace; trust in God, and put our **faith** in Him; keep alive the hope of **salvation**; and have a knowledge and understanding of **God's word** (also known as, Holy Scripture.) Did you get all that? Seek the truth... value godly righteousness... be ready to be about the work of the gospel... have faith... rejoice in your salvation... be a student of the Bible.

To be "clothed" in these types of qualities and convictions is, according to Paul, to be dressed in the right kind of uniform for the life of Christian faith. And, like the people who lived in Paul's first century world, we who live in this fractured and grief-stricken twenty-first century world, must never, ever, forget that!

Because if we do, we're quickly going to learn that keeping our faith, and growing in our faith, amid all the challenges we face in life... takes more than mere religious belief and the going through the motions of a pious but comfortably undemanding tradition. We will learn that the problems of life, both physical and spiritual, will quickly overwhelm us... if we try to face them with nothing more formidable than sentimental slogans and a faith that's kept safely tucked away until we need it for some emergency. We will learn that Christian faith, and Christian life, without

courage, and sacrifice, and passionate intelligent conviction... is always going to feel like something less than it could be, and should be.

And so, Paul says, prepare yourself to live the Christian life boldly, wisely, victoriously! **Know** God's Word; renounce cockadoodie self-aggrandizement and practice genuine **virtue**; love the **truth**, seek the truth, resist that which compromises the truth; walk the walk of real **faith**, don't just talk the talk of it, which any nincompoop can do; be **ready**, always be ready, to follow the Lord wherever and however He leads you.

Approach your faith in **this** way, says Paul, and you will be suited up, dressed up, and uniformed up for a life of Christian faith that really matters! For a life of Christian discipleship that will nourish you, and sustain you, and carry you through **anything** that this life, and this world, can throw at you! And I say that that's the kind of Christian faith that we all want... and that we all need.

As we finish up, let's remember that, just because we may be "dressed for success" for the life of Christian faith... it doesn't mean that we've suddenly become invulnerable to the problems, and dilemmas, and unanswered questions of life. Neither Paul, nor any other New Testament writer, guarantees us a life free from terrorists, illness, disappointment, or the day to day difficulties which occupy so much of our time and energy. Our uniforms as Christians aren't bulletproof.

No, but they sure do help us... when the problems, and the heartaches, and the challenges start flying! And, most of all, they remind us that, no matter what manner of maniac chaos might be running amok in this world... it's still **God's** world!

And one day, He's going to reclaim this world; and all the sin, and evil, and problems which make our Christian uniforms necessary in the first place... will be done away with, forever! That's not wishful thinking; and that's not "pie in the sky." That's the promise of the gospel... and the unshakable hope of God's people, from the first day, to **to-day**!

May we take our stand upon that promise, and that hope; today, tomorrow, and all the days of our life! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!