Sunday July 20, 1997

THE ARMOR OF GOD

Ephesians 6:10-17

The armies of Israel and Philistia were on opposite sides of the valley testing and defying one another. Each morning the giant Goliath would come out and shout, "Don't you have any man among you who will come out and fight with me? If he is able to fight me and kill me, then we will be your servants, but if I win, then you will be our servants." Instead of having the armies fight each other, Goliath suggested that the issue be settled by a one to one battle between two people. But each day the army of Israel could find no one with enough courage to face Goliath. This had been going on for 40 days.

It was the custom in those days for the families of the soldiers to send food to family members who were in the army. So Jesse, who had his three eldest sons in the army, sent their young shepherd brother, David, with some corn and bread for his older brothers. Jesse also wanted David to bring back news as to how the army and his sons were doing.

When David came to his brothers near the front line, it was the time of day when Goliath made his regular appearance. David, seeing and hearing the challenge to the army of Israel asked two questioons: "Who is this heathen Philistine that is defying the armies of God?" and "What's the reward for the man who faces this giant and wins?" With these questions, David implied that he was willing to meet Goliath's challenge.

When King Saul heard about David and his questions, he sent for him. Now David was more outspoken. He told the king-- "Don't let Goliath scare the entire army, I will go and fight with this giant." But Saul replied, "You are only a young man inexperienced in the ways of war. How can you handle this giant Goliath?"

David who was wise in the ways of the fields as a shepherd said that he had once fought a bear and a lion while taking care of his father's sheep. He said that he could certainly then fight with this heathen Philistine who had defied the armies of God. Furthermore, David said, "The Lord who delivered me from the lion and the bear will deliver me from this giant."

In an attempt to help, King Saul offered David the

king's armor. So they brought out the King's armor and put it on David's shoulders and gave him the king's large sword. David put on the armor, but as he tried to move while wearing it, he said, "I can't fight with this armor. It's too big and heavy and doesn't fit. Furthermore, I'm not used to it. I've got to go without this kind of armor. I will use my own skills and weapons, the tools I'm familiar with." So David took his shepherd's staff, chose five smooth stones from the brook, took his sling and went out to meet Goliath.

As he got near Goliath, the giant was insulted. He said to David, "Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks and stones? I'm going to feed your flesh to the birds." David, however put one of his stones in his sling, aimed for the giant's

head, hit him and knocked him unconscious. He then took Goliath's own sword and killed him. When the Philistine army saw that their champion was dead, they fled in fear.

This story of David and Goliath tells us several things about the armor we have or don't have and how it can be used or misused.

1. Note first that it's a mistake to borrow and use someone else's armor. It most likely will not fit and will only hinder you. David knew this. Saul's armor wouldn't work for him. He had to go in his own strength and in his own integrity. He had to use the tools with which he was most familiar.

We're not always as wise as David. Sometimes we try to borrow other people's armor for our

own lives. We borrow all sorts of defenses which do not fit us and try to use them in our dealings with other people.

A number of years ago a best-selling book had the title, "Winning Through Intimidation." The author tried to convince his readers that they should put on armor that makes them tough and win with it by intimidating others. He was asking his readers to be something they were not and in the long run it doesn't work. As David knew, it's better to fight without any armor at all than to try to use someone else's.

2. In the second place, this story of David and Goliath tells us that too much armor of any kind, even though our own, can ultimately be a burden and destroy us. We place our trust in our armor

rather than in our own skills and ability.

Consider Goliath with heavy armor covering his body. The very armor he wore and carried to defend himself enabled David with his freedom of movement, his flexibility of action and the naturalness and simplicity of his own experience to conquer the giant with a sling shot. Too much armor can prove a hindrance to any one of us.

Some people carry the heavy armor of defensiveness. They say, "Nobody is going to hurt me. I'll be tough as nails. I won't risk trusting anyone. So they drive potential friends away. They have so much armor on that no one will even get close to them. The more they try to defend themselves from others, the heavier their armor becomes and the more people try to avoid dealing with them.

People with heavy armor are the loneliest people in the world.

Others carry the heavy armor of self-righteousne-ss. They can never admit they are wrong and they are certain that no one can win in any kind of contest with them, particularly no one like David who wore no visible outward armor.

Many years ago when Ralph Nader was begin-ning his consumer advocacy, he was like David going against Goliath, no matter what you think of Mr. Nader today. His first book entitled, "Un-safe At Any Speed," was an expose of the dan-gers of one particular automobile, the Corvair. The auto manufacturer with all its armor of defen-siveness and self-righteousness did its best to attack Mr. Nader. They spied on him, tried to

lure him into compromising situations with women, and in the end the president of the corporation was forced to make a public apology for what they had tried to do to Mr. Nader.

How much better it would've been for everyone if the company had simply said in the first place, "The Corvair could be unsafe. We're going to test it very carefully and if it is we are going to do our best to correct it." Why is that so difficult for us to do today as individuals and as institutions?

In his new little book, "Don"t Sweat the Small Stuff...and its all small stuff," the author Richard Carlson writes in one of his chapters, "Just for fun, agree with criticism directed toward you and then watch it go away." He goes on to say, "So often we are immobilized by the slightest criti-

cism. We treat it like an emergency and defend ourselves as if we were in a battle. In truth, however, criticism is nothing more than an observation by another person about us, our actions, or the way we think about something that doesn't match the vision we have of ourselves. Big deal."

"When we react to criticism with a knee-jerk, defensive response, it hurts. We feel attacked, and we have a need to defend ourselves or to offer a countercriticism. We fill our minds with angry or hurtful thoughts directed at ourselves or at the person who is being critical. All this reaction takes an enormous amount of energy."

"An incredibly useful exercise is to agree with criticism directed toward you. I'm not talking about turning into a doormat or ruining your

self-esteem by believing all negativity that comes in your direction. I'm only suggesting that there are many times when simply agreeing with criti-cism defuses the situation, satisfies a person's needs to express a point of view, offers you a chance to learn something about yourself by seeing a grain of truth in another position and perhaps most important, provides you an oppor-tunity to remain calm."

The author, Richard Carlson, then tells about an incident in his own life. "One of the first times I consciously agreed with criticism directed toward me was many years ago when my wife said to me, 'Sometimes you talk too much.' I remember feeling momentarily hurt before deciding to agree. I responded by saying, 'You're right, I do talk too much sometimes.' I discovered some-

thing that changed my life. In agreeing with her, I was able to see that she had a good point. I often do talk too much. What's more my nondefensive reaction helped her to relax. A few minutes later she said, 'You know, you're sure easy to talk to.' I doubt she would've said that had I become angry at her observation. I've since learned that reacting to criticism never makes the criticism go away. On the other hand, agreeing with an occasional criticism has more value than it costs."

The fact is that ultimately victory goes to those who are simple, creative, open and flexible rather than to those of us who try to hide behind heavy armors of defensiveness and self-righteousness. This is true for businesses, for churches and for us as individuals.

There are so many kinds of heavy armor we wear that weigh us down.

For some people, their work is their heavy armor. Recently I came across a story about a man whose work was so much his defensive armor that he worked himself to death. The obituary didn't say that of course. It said he died of a coronary thrombosis. He was 51 years old when he died and he was a senior vice-president of the company for which he worked. He was one of several senior vice-presidents, any one of which could conceivably--if the president died or retired soon enough--have moved to the top spot. He knew that.

He worked six and sometimes seven days a week, oftentimes until 8:00 or 9:00 in the evening.

He had no outside extracurricular interests. He was overweight by 20 to 25 pounds.

He was survived by his wife 49 years old. She had, according to her daughter, given up trying to compete with his work years ago when the children were small. A company friend said to her, "I know how much you will miss him, " and she answered, "I've been missing him for years."

His children said that whenever their dad was alone with them, which was not often, they had nothing to say to each other. The man's work was his heavy armor. Few people could get close to him. His armor finally destroyed him.

Why do some of us need so much armor? We wear armor in proportion to our fear. The more

fearful and afraid of life and people we are, the more armor we put on.

3. The third thing this story of David and Goliath tells us about armor is that whatever armor we have, it has to be the right kind and not be a cover-up for fear or anything else.

David had the right kind of armor. His armor was that he was not afraid to be himself. He had inner confidence and he had confidence in God. In fact his ultimate armor was his faith and trust in God's goodness. That kind of armor never weighs us down, but lifts us up. David said, "I am going out in the name of the Lord with my integrity, my individuality and my own unique gifts. I know who I am. I know my strengths and weaknesses." That's armor of a totally different

kind.

A person who is secure in himself or herself and secure in his or her trust in God is never brutal or brittle. It is the uncertain, unsure person who tries to be tough and mean because he or she is inwardly soft and afraid. They need the kind of armor that is a cover-up.

The best armor of all is openness and trust. When we are open and trust others, we ourselves make fewer mistakes. Of course, trusting others is always a risk. But it's a risk either way. If you trust, you might get hurt. But if you do not trust, you are going to get hurt for sure.

Furthermore when you trust another person, you help that person to emerge. In not trusting an-

other person, you diminish that person and in diminishing an individual, you can create your own enemy.

The point is that you can't be carrying a heavy armor and at the same time be trusting of other people. The heavy armor you wear often becomes a barrier to trust and openness. It keeps others at a distance. It keeps us from loving relationships.

Our Christian faith calls us to be open and vulnerable people, unfettered by ties of fear and unchained by rigid ideologies.

Then we have a different kind of armor. It is the armor of God. The letter to the Ephesians in the Bible describes it this way: "Put on the whole armor of God, having girded your loins with truth

and having put on the breastplate of righteousness and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God."

In other words, we are to deal with life in courage and trust instead of agression, revenge and defensiveness. When we do that, obstacles like Goliath always fall on their face. Amen.