

We all tend to love and value flexibility. You know some of the phrases....”When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” “Swim with the stream.” “Go with the flow.” It is that kind of attitude that makes our bit of scripture today challenging for us, because here the author of this scripture, likely Paul, counsels us to stand firm: “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). This is the opposite of going with the flow!

First off, when reading this scripture, you can see that there are a LOT of words that relate to a military context. We have “putting on the whole armor,” “breastplate,” “power,” “struggle,” “standing against,” “shield,” “helmet,” and “sword.” All those words dominating that reading clearly reflect the reality of the church’s social setting at the end of the first century. The dominance of the Roman Empire and the pervasiveness of its military strength would have given those descriptions of armor (and such) a solid connection with the audience of Ephesians. They were living solidly in the midst of that reality.

Paul does not seem to be encouraging conformity. If Paul was really interested in conformity, he would have encouraged the Christian church to just blend in with the conventional morality and wisdom of the time. Sadly, over the centuries, the “official” church has sometimes taken that route, and aligned itself or conformed to whatever the status quo happened to be at the time.

But Paul’s counsel can make one downright unpopular. Yet even when the stance is unpopular, still Paul counsels us to stand firm on our convictions and not be given to whim.

Who can do this? Who can stand on convictions when the tide of popularity turns against us and those strong winds of criticism blow? Is this all about being the lone rangers, standing rigidly and resolute?

Nope, Paul is talking about Christian identity and the roots of our common faith. In order to stand firm, we have to be nurtured in a tradition, a faithful and inclusive community, and to grow deep.

There is a difference between being stubborn and standing firm. Paul is not asking us to be stubborn, steadfast to an opinion, rooted in prejudice, or closed-minded. But he is asking us to stand in something that is not a whim, but something that is embracing, renewing, and loving. This may mean being willing to be humble and to risk being unpopular—maybe even to suffer ridicule as a faithful person in the community of faith. A stubborn person will not listen to ideas that differ from his or her own. A stubborn person will likely reject alternatives out of hand and refuses, regardless of the situation, to change their position.

Archie Smith Jr. has this to say about it:

“Stubbornness is not self-or-other discerning. It is not informed, and it does not grow. It is enshrined in a closed circle of certainty and becomes fearful, boisterous, and one-dimensional. The stubborn heart and mind are impervious to reason.

Standing firm is different. Standing firm means that one is willing to debate, listen, and consider alternatives in order to reach a beneficial goal, while at the same time not sacrificing basic principles.

Martin Luther King Jr. stood firm on nonviolence. Margaret Sanger, the twentieth-century suffragette, stood firm on women’s rights. Nelson Mandela stood firm and resolute against apartheid.

Robert Sobukwe stood firm as he faced the evils of imprisonment under apartheid. All stood firm against injustice. The lesson we draw from them is that to have a strong ego, a concern for justice and compassion, is to be grounded in the convictions of the community and open to critical evaluation. This is how we stand firm, as Paul contends”.

So, I have to admit, I was unfamiliar with Robert Sobukwe, so I had to do a little research. As head of the Pan Africanist Congress during the time of apartheid in South Africa, he organized a 5 day, non-violent, disciplined, and sustained protest campaign against pass laws, starting on March 21, 1960. When an estimated group of 5,000 marchers reached the Sharpeville police station, the police opened fire killing 69 people and injuring 180 others in what became known as the Sharpeville Massacre.

The pass laws I mentioned were enacted in 1952 and required black South Africans over the age of 16 to carry a pass book, known as dompas, everywhere and at all times. Each year, over 250,000 blacks were arrested for technical offenses under the Pass Laws. As a result, the dompas became the most despised symbol of apartheid.

Sobukwe was sentenced to 3 years in prison for inciting Africans to demand the repeal of the pass laws. He refused to appeal against the sentence, as well as the aid of an attorney, on the grounds that the court had no jurisdiction over him as it could not be considered either a court of law or a court of justice. He stood firm. But, at the end of his 3 year sentence, Parliament enacted a General Law Amendment Act, which empowered the Minister of Justice to prolong the detention of any political prisoner indefinitely. So, he was imprisoned for an additional 6

years. The clause was never used to detain anyone else. During those 6 years, Sobukwe was kept in solitary confinement. He was, however, allowed access to books and civilian clothes. As a result, he spent much of his time studying, and he obtained a degree in economics from the University of London. Sobukwe was released from prison in May of 1969, but he remained under 12 hour house arrest and was prohibited from being involved in any political activity. So, he studied law and eventually established his own law firm in 1975. The government's Department of Justice initially denied him permission to enter the courts, but reversed the decision. Even then, newspapers were not allowed to quote him when he argued in court.

Can you imagine? No doubt Sobukwe became discouraged at times. But he found strength somehow to hope. He stood firm in his convictions and somehow that act of standing firm gave his struggle purpose and meaning.

May we continue to be attuned to God's rich mercies and to the spiritual resources to be found among people and in nature. Spiritual resources that help us to stand firm, to resist, to endure in the struggle...against systemic forces, or as the Scripture says, "the principalities, the powers..the rulers of this present darkness."

I ran across on Facebook some tips for well-being during this ongoing Covid pandemic...It suggests the following:
Tend something growing and living (for me that is our Black Lab!)
Be mindfully present to: a sound or song; a sensory feeling; something you see; a spiritual practice.
Reach out to a human outside your home.
Do one thing to get your heart rate up.

Do one thing you'll be glad you did later.
Do one thing just because you want to.
Get in at least one good laugh.

Spiritual resources may be found in the living expressions of people, in the divine-human relationship, and in the natural environment. Ideally, we keep God, self, others, and nature all together in the struggle. May we experience spiritual growth in hope and resiliency, in standing firm, in faith and doubt, in prayer and play.

May we continue to recognize the rich expressions of spiritual resources in the wonders of nature, in acts of boldness and justice among us, and in the compassion and courage of this faith community.

Thanks be to God!