



Dress for Spiritual Success

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost || August 25, 2024 || 9:30 am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Proper 16B || Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

What a joy it is to be together on this gorgeous Sunday morning – to be able to share this experience of study, music, worship and reflection. I love that we “come with joy to meet our Lord, forgiven, loved and free” as we all just sang.

Ages ago, when I worked for the National Red Cross in DC, we were eager to figure out how to have our employees show up for work, if not with joy, at least with an expectation of kindness and focus for the work we shared. We sought to address and transform the cultural morale problem in our complicated organization. There were myriad reasons for low morale. High leadership turnover, and I would have to include the annual layoffs as a budget balancing exercise as being way high up on the list of why employees were perpetually bummed out.

In my naivete I suggested that we take our employees to a seminar dedicated to improving morale and increasing our teams' job satisfaction.

Our expectation was that our Red Cross team would learn some techniques for reshaping attitudes – or turning frowns upside down. This was in the era of the pop culture phenomena of “Who Moved My Cheese” and the Fish series of books – Fish || Fish Tails || Fish Sticks which profile the happy fish mongers at Seattle's famed Pike's Place Market.

All of these books and workshops were aimed at improving morale and productivity. Being demoralized at work definitely impacts productivity, and at its core each of the employee-morale-improvement programs included the premise that we can each choose the attitude with which we do our work.

The first time I observed an employee faux-spraying themselves with metaphorical armor, and asked what in the world she was doing, she earnestly explained that she was practicing what the teaching she learned at the morale boosting seminar, and I laughed out loud. For at least

one minute the seminar's teachings worked because the laughter across our group was infectious.

We could have saved big bucks and Red Cross donation dollars if we had simply invited employees to read this morning's gospel and epistle scripture passages.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus is dealing with some low and challenging morale among His followers. He repeats his teaching from last week, "whoever eats me will live because of me [T]he one who eats this bread will live forever." One of my favorite clergy colleagues who refers to this as the Vampire Gospel, is undoubtedly preaching to his congregation this morning about these lessons and the Twilight series or Vampire Diaries.

Jesus knows that his teachings are challenging counter cultural lessons, that following Him is hard, and that not everyone can abide in him. Some of those early disciples did indeed leave.

Imagine how dispiriting it would be having left everything familiar – your job, your family, your community, and everything familiar to follow Jesus, and then to have some of your new friends and community members drop out or leave. When Jesus challenges the remaining disciples about whether they will stay or go, those who stay, whose spokesperson this morning is Simon Peter doesn't respond with a happy and full hearted - "OH YES, WE ARE STAYING. BEING WITH YOU, JESUS, IS THE BEST!" The response, instead is as though he is an attitudinal teenager – perhaps at the beginning of his own ministry "Yeh, we'll stay because - where else can we go?"

Being a disciple is hard. Following Jesus' teaching is tough.

The biggest "swing and a miss" that I've found in the morale boosting programs and books is the lack of acknowledgment that some jobs are hard! The Red Cross is a remarkable organization with an exceptional and storied history, but it is hard to respond with love and vulnerability to endless disasters or maintain the nation's blood supply so that it is safe, available and effective. Without acknowledging the difficulties inherent in these jobs I don't think any program can be effective in boosting morale and productivity.

We have our divine Jesus acknowledging that his teachings are tough. Being an ancient social activist proclaiming God's immutable love and grace and the divinity of Jesus must have been as exhausting for the apostles as it is unsettling for us.

We are not left alone to take up Christ's call and navigate this challenging path. We have each other, and this morning we are treated to our Epistle lesson with the familiar – sung about – preached about – Monty Python parodied "Put on the Whole Armor of God"!

We are offered tools to make our work and ministry as followers of Jesus just a little bit easier. We are told to wear the Belt of Truth, don the Breastplate of Righteousness and the Helmet of Salvation, to wield the Shield of Faith and the Sword of the Spirit and then whatever shoes will help us proclaim the gospel of peace.

My closet contains none of the prescribed accoutrements. I'm right out of breastplates, helmets, swords and shields, but I love the idea of dressing for God's work and equipping ourselves to be the Saints Jesus enlisted.

What might we use to empower us to do God's work? What if we donned the lipstick of Love, the eye-glasses of Gladness, the cardigan of Community, the blue jeans of Justice, the blazer of Belovedness, or walked with the cane of Community? and definitely some fabulous and comfortable shoes in order to do the work God has given us to do.

Please allow a sponsorship commercial for a core element of the St. Andrew's wardrobe armor for doing God's work - the St. Andrew's "Make Kindness Loud" t-shirts. We are selling Make Kindness Loud t-shirts – and hoping to have as many team members as possible wearing St. Andrew's Blue on Come Back Sunday, September 22.

Back to our regularly scheduled program: what do you have in your wardrobe that can be part of your uniform to do God's work?

When we get dressed this week, let us consider that we are dressing to do God's work, to proclaim the Gospel through our actions, to practice the lessons Jesus taught to love our neighbors.

Let's skip the too tight stuff that makes you uncomfortable and might distract you from experiencing or sharing God's love. Ditch the constrictive tie or the t-shirt that is a sentimental favorite but may not convey the message that you and God are going for.

Get dressed for God this week, and snap a selfie to share with us. I'm excited to see St. Andrew's in the world, and would love to have you share a photo of you in your Full Armor of God. Send it into the office and we'll share what we receive in this week's Call. Please know that even with the right attire, this work – God's work can be challenging!

I invite us to close with the prayer that is included in this letter to the Ephesians. This is the Epistle writer's acknowledgement that the work is tough and that even he needs the Ephesians' prayers in order to carry out this work. We need each other's prayers in addition to our updated, modern warrior wardrobe.

Let us pray:

“Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known **with boldness** the mystery of the gospel”

Amen+