Jerked out of context, as so many biblical texts are, this passage can be manipulated to justify some pretty un-Christian thought and behavior. Both Jesus[1] and Paul[2] used military imagery as a vehicle for their nonviolent gospel. So did Martin Luther King, Jr. We need a context in which to anchor this military imagery.

Ephesians likely was written posthumously after Paul's death as a summary of his teachings and writings, and its summary nature is crucial for understanding the passages within it. For example, it is crucial to understand Paul's distinction between human wisdom and "the foolishness of God."[3]

Paul's argument is that God's power, as revealed in Christ, is a self-giving love for others, a power made perfect in weakness. The Jewish expectation of Messiah projected a powerful military figure who would bring about God's righteous reign by the violence of military action. That image was transformed and redefined by God's will as revealed in the suffering and death of Jesus.

The military imagery of the Armor of God reflects that transformation. Instead of a sword, Christians are called to wield the Word of truth. Instead of an armored breastplate, Christians are urged to take on the vulnerability of standing for what is right and just. The paradox is that the gospel of peace makes one ready for "war," i.e., struggle against entrenched evil,[4] ***"…for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."***

Now, there are risks in using all that "Satan language." There also are values, one of which is that it keeps us from identifying our fellow human beings as the ultimate enemy.[5] Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil: endemic racism and its denial, all the phobias and insecurities and greed that lead to repression and cruelty against the most vulnerable members of society—the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters.

Military armor is used to reduce the vulnerability of the soldier—to add a protective layer between him and the thrust of the enemy's sword. The armor of God, by contrast, is the opposite: the one who wears it is totally vulnerable, because vulnerability is the nature of love. If you've loved and lost, you know that.

That's why I believe God's response to human sin is not angry retaliation but grief. The Psalmist wrote of the children of Israel, "How often they rebelled against God in the wilderness and grieved God in the desert!"

The wisdom of the world has remade God in the image of humanity. But Paul

[1] Matt. 10:34; Luke 14:31
[2] 1 Thess. 5:8; 2 Cor. 6:7; 10:3, 4; Rom. 6:13, 23; 13:12
[3] 1 Cor. 1:17-2:5.
[4] Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 610). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.
[5] Ibid., page 611.

devotes almost two chapters in I Corinthians to the theme, "The foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of humanity." And the foolishness of God is demonstrated in the ultimate vulnerability of the cross.

And so, the writer of Ephesians waxes poetic in this beautiful metaphoric passage that lifts up the vulnerability expressed in the cross of Christ:

The belt of truth: no illusion; no alternative facts; no abstract philosophical notion of truth; just truth rooted in the trustworthiness of God.[6]

The breastplate of righteousness: I've said so many times, in the biblical languages "justice" and "righteousness" come from the same root word. It means "what is right," and right is defined in the descriptive laws of God and in the utterances of God's prophets, and almost always includes compassionate treatment of the poorest, weakest, most vulnerable members of the community.

Sandals to stand in the gospel of peace: in the wisdom of the world peace is maintained through power and might. But people like Gandhi, Deitrick Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr. demonstrate that society can be moved toward justice by more vulnerable strategies of peaceful, nonviolent resistance. And the perceived need of force to maintain peace is a concession to society's lack of justice.

The shield of Faith: talk about vulnerability! The purpose of a military shield is immediate and tangible. Rather than immediate gratification, faith looks beyond the moment toward ultimate concerns and meaning. We live and act as if we truly believe what we say we believe—even when there is no immediate verification. And we humans have difficulty considering any possibility that we may be wrong.

The helmet of Salvation: In 1 Thessalonians Paul uses this same metaphor; but as the "hope of salvation." Here, salvation is accomplished. It's a done deal.

The sword of the Spirit… the Word of God: Even though the metaphor is a sword, the Word of God was never intended as a weapon with which to beat people into submission. In the epistle to the Hebrews the same metaphor functions to divide truth and falsehood and to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul established a principle crucial to the discipline of following Jesus: ***"Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and complete"*** **(12:2).** The writer of Ephesians captures that principle in this metaphor of the armor of God. He takes a military image—a sign of human wisdom—and transforms it into a display of the foolishness of God that makes power perfect in weakness—that takes the human need for protection and transforms it into a Christ-like willingness to lay one's life on the line for the sake of the Gospel.

That's the ultimate purpose of it all: the Gospel—or, as the writer puts it

[6] Ibid.

here, "the mystery of the Gospel." Here in these closing paragraphs of the epistle the writer returns to his opening imagery: ***With all wisdom and insight*** [9]***(God) has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ,*** [10]***as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things*** *(to sum up or to unite or to reestablish all things)* ***in him, things in heaven and things on earth"*** **(1:8b-10).**

God has made known to us… God's will shines all through the Scriptures, from the Covenant with Abraham that "through him all nations of the earth will be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-2) God's will is made known in the prophets:

- Isaiah: "I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations…" (42:6)
- Jeremiah: "the nations shall be blessed by you, and by you they shall boast" (4:2).
- Micah: "…and many nations shall come and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of YHWH, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths'…" (4:2).
- It's reestablished in Christ: John 3:16: "God so loved *the world*…"

The secret is out! The cat's out of the bag! But for some it remains a mystery because their vision is myopic; they're looking for security and control in the moment, for iron-clad guarantees of heaven when they die.

But the mystery of the Gospel is rooted in trust. Take off the armor human wisdom says is necessary. Put on the armor of God—the vulnerability that is the secret of the Gospel. That's why the Gospel is rationalized by human wisdom. The Gospel always will be vulnerable, because the Gospel always confronts injustice inherent in a human wisdom of insecure self-centeredness and protectiveness. The Gospel always will be vulnerable, because the Gospel is love, and love always is risky business. There's a famous quote by Hillary Stanton Zunin: *"The risk of love is loss, and the price of loss is grief - But the pain of grief is only a shadow when compared with the pain of never risking love."*

Clad in the armor of God we risk reaching out in love to include those rejected and hated by a society; indeed, by a rationalized and compromised Christianity that exercises human wisdom. We become vulnerable to ridicule and rejection—and maybe even a cross. But that's the only way offered in the Judeo/Christian Scriptures by which humanity might be saved from itself.

Pastoral Prayer

Sadly, there are evil people on the internet: trolls who gather information and use it to hurt and upset and disrupt. So, we're no longer going to be sharing personal prayer needs in our live virtual worship. We do that before we go live; and we've built a pretty effective congregational network through emails and texts—and sometimes we even talk to each other on the phone [we can be old school]. So, when any of our congregants and friends are absent, but want to be a part of our caring ministry can do so.

Jesus, Word Incarnate, you came to us as one of us: vulnerable as we are vulnerable, and you participate in our shared human condition.

Some of your people are suffering again; and across borders and oceans all of us suffer from time-to-time. We are frail and easily filled with anxiety.

But we remember similar times in the past when you gave us grace to make the love of God a real and tangible presence in the world, and in that presence to find healing and peace and unity.

Help us to live in that presence today—to be that presence today. Help us to love as you would love, to care as you would care.

Make us wise and prudent, compassionate and courageous. Grant us empathy and lead us into ministries of solidarity with the vulnerable of the world and of our community—the least of your brothers and sisters.

Let our hearts touch where our hands can't. Let our eyes speak when our words fail.

Help us to pray!

Let our prayers strengthen those who care for others. Let our prayers calm those who fear. Let our prayers comfort the sick, and those who love them.

Give us grace and faith to live with strength in troubled times. Draw us closer to you and to one another.

We trust in you. Amen.

Communion Meditation

Some life situations invite us to look both backward and forward. Some are good—graduations, weddings, New Year's Day. Some are not so good—an epidemic of violence with guns, serious illness, systemic hatred expressed to the least of Christ's brothers and sisters. This Table gives us opportunity to look back and to look forward.

When we take the bread, we look back to Jesus' broken body on the cross. We become aware of our imperfections and, while we don't understand how, we remember the cross somehow is related to our reconciliation with each other and with God.

When we take the cup, we remember that it was the third Passover cup, "The Cup of Blessing," that he offered as a "New promise, guaranteed in his blood," and in the cup we recognize and give thanks for God's blessings; for God's grace and mercy.

And at this Table *we look forward* as well. We declare our confident expectation of Christ's ongoing presence and that awareness influences our intentions going forward.

We have a living hope because we have a living Lord.