

EYES WIDE OPEN...1 Corinthians 16: 13-14, Psalm

It is always special times when family gets together for holidays or weekends. We enjoy having our children home, although we discovered what our age group of friends told us was true..... Life without the children isn't so bad either. We readjusted, we got to enjoying each other again on a different level and life goes on!

It is just as true for our children, which is no surprise. We can overhear them telling their friends about being home to hang-out with the old folks, but how they are looking forward to getting back to their place and being with their friends.

As Will, our son, drove away returning to his own place where he attends graduate school, we were well aware that we had pushed our luck and his patience to the limit. He was packed none too soon and eager to get off. We stood in the driveway and began the usual list of "Be Careful's." As he resisted the expected list, we chuckled and started down the list of all that we have said for years, all of which he had long since learned to take in stride and eventually overlook.

"Drive carefully!" "No, Mom. I was thinking of being reckless and getting a \$200 ticket!" "Stay warm! Have you got your jacket?" As we began to realize the silliness of telling a 25 year old all of these things, the list exploded! "Wear your Hat! Wash your ears! Watch your gas gage! Remember to call your Grandmother! Call us when you get in! Don't risk parking in the restricted zones! Tickets! Remember?" We just couldn't resist giving the old commands, realizing they were more for our sakes than for his!

Paul's simple verse for us this morning rings out those standard commands to the beloved Christians in Corinth where he had stayed for ___ years! Surely they had heard them all before, but how critical to every growing Christian and every well directed

congregation! They sound like the familiar words of a loving parent reminding a growing child of the basics that keep all of us safe and secure. Yet on another level these words sound like Marching Orders! Like words issued by a commander of soldiers on a battle site. As William Barclay paraphrased it: *"As a sentinel, be ever on the alert. When under attack, stand fast in the faith, and yield not an inch. In time of battle, play a hero's part. Like a well equipped and well trained soldier, be strong to fight for your divine commander."*

The reference is clear. Like it or not, we Christians are all part of a great army. We are under orders. Certainly we are in a world which in many and various ways has tried and continues to try to destroy our cause. Often we experience it by efforts to restrict and contain the church to a narrow and sterile realm called "religion."

Dr. Langdon Gilkey has an excellent book entitled, *How a Church Can Minister to the World Without Losing Itself*. Here in this verse we can overhear the answer of a genuine soldier of God, a successful visionary as the first battle lines are being drawn. Paul says, *"It is not as easy as you think to be true and faithful, and you must never forget that!"* So what do we need to hear from our spiritual mentors? And willing to take and take seriously?

1.FIRST, Be Alert! Yes, there are those who would oppose you and who would like nothing better than to see you be anything other than faithful to your God. Be on your guard for them and know their strength. There are areas occupied by enemies of Christ's kind of living. We need to know what Paul said at another time and place, *"All things are acceptable, but not all things are beneficial!"* If the devil is in the details, the devil is surely lurking deliciously in many of the little indulgences that we allow ourselves as Christians. Bad habits that are harmless on the

surface. Nurturing attitudes that do not reflect Christ's best for you, or even holding on to some thoughts so hidden within, that you have fooled yourself into thinking you can afford them, that you don't really have to give them up. After all, you never really unleash them on anybody, you just keep them to yourself.

Gossipers have the hardest time with this one. *"I may have forgiven, but I will never forget."* And then the little tale of what we heard, or saw, or think, or don't like about someone keeps on slipping out. *"We owe it to a friend to warn them!"* Listen! What if we really took Christ seriously and erased to need to set the records straight at our hand? What if we really let God handle that, when He said, *"'Vengeance is Mine', saith the Lord!"*

What if we decided to really hear the call to surrender our lives to His control again. What if we really decided to trust Him? That would make us be alert! Peter in his first letter warned, *"Be alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him!"*

Again, *"Be on your guard!"* Be aware of your opposition and their strength. Don't naively overestimate your ability to resist, nor underestimate their ability to persist and prevail. An interviewer for a Fortune 500 company once told me that the person that succeeds, and the person they are looking for, is the person who knows who they are. One who has a realistic assessment of their real strengths and weaknesses and is, as he said, *"well defined."* That person prevails through all that the capricious business world and its fickle crowd can throw at him or her.

At Seminary at Wake Forest, friends at NC State brought several of us a beautiful little solid black kitten they had found on their campus. We kept him and he became one of the delights of our last year there. We had rented an old pre-Civil War home of old Dr. Mackey, a great benefactor of the old school campus. It had

lots of rooms where 4 of us upperclassmen lived. That tiny kitten became one that ate ravenously and grew to be a huge cat. He had no greater delight than to hide from us as we came home from each day's class. Right when we least expected, this monster cat would leap out from behind a door and pounce on us, grabbing a leg or a bare foot of an unsuspecting and bleary eyed student! As quickly as he appeared he would retreat and wait for his next victim! Things like that make you learn to be alert!

Stay on guard!

2.Second, Paul admonishes us to **Stand firm in your Faith!**

That is, in regard for your relationship to the Creator, the living God, have a rock solid conviction based on the truth of the Gospel! Know that God has embraced, loved and forgiven you through the cross of Christ Jesus. Know the deep and abiding truth of Grace, that you may be a rotten sinner or just a casual cheater, but that God's grace, His Rich undeserved mercy is yours by simple childlike, living Faith in Him. *"You who have been far from Him are now brought near! You who were nobody are now somebody to God in Christ Jesus! You who couldn't be forgiven to save your life are now forgiven and full of mercy! You are his child, God's joy and His own possession!"* God longs to share His heart with you, to fill you with blessings, to give you strength. He longs to share His eternal heaven with you!

Know the Gospel is not just some religious practice, it is an everyday living trust. The Gospel is your hope, it is to be a firm conviction on which you plant your feet and stand firm. This means, you trust yourself and your purpose in life into God's keeping, and there you leave them. You live on in confident hope in every day's joyful walk with Him who never leaves you or forsakes you. **Stand Firm in the Faith.**

3. Thirdly, Be people of Courage. John Mark was probably the young disciple who ran away wrapped in a bedsheet when soldiers forcibly took Jesus from the Garden. Mark also defected even after he was older, after he had promised to go with Paul and Barnabas. The going got tough and the mission became overwhelming to him, and he ran away again. But the symbol for the Apostle Mark through the years of Christendom has become the lion. The tradition says he was dragged through the streets of his episcopal city to his martyrdom.

Psalm 31 says *"Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait on the Lord!"* (v.24) Isaiah's memorable words encourage us that, *"Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength.....they will rise up with wings as eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint."* Courage, as they say, is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to stay just 5 minutes longer than the last time you tried it. In other words, let your mind (your thoughts) keep hoping in God and your heart (your emotions) will become courageous. You may be weak and indecisive, but God turns skittish rabbits into valiant lions, like he did Mark.

Be people of courage.

4. Finally, he says, **"Be strong."** So many of us quit when our strength fails. How will we discover God's strength unless we go sometimes beyond our strength, on only in obedience. Too much of what we do is our thing, our strength, our skill, our energy, our way, our learned way of relating, our controls. How do we ever have an experience with the strength of our living God unless we try something that is beyond our ability, unless we try something that is "God sized?"

When Mary heard the bidding of the Angel to bear a son for God, she protested out of a mixture of doubt and humility. She must

have puzzled over the plan presented to her, but her protest drew the angel's greatest affirmation. *"With man this is impossible; but all things are possible with God."* How else will a church hear and see what God wants to do and can do, unless with conviction, courage and strength she attempts to do great things for God, just because she expects great things from God.

It was Paul's greatest moment when he said to the Philippian church, *"I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength!"*because from then on he did! Be strong means to hold on when the way seems impossible, holding on when the way is dark and lonely. So many quit when they can discover what it is like to be more than conquerors. But it is hard, and it requires you..... **To be strong.**

The apostle's next short verse comes on like a bookend to hold up all the other words. *"You may have to act like a soldier, but I remind you about Jesus, you still must do everything in love!"* As he closes this great book of instruction on every imaginable need for a congregation.....

- *the doctrine of the resurrection
- * the challenges of ecstasy, prophecy and tongues
- *the teaching and description of pure love
- *Spiritual gifts, worship, the Lord's Supper, marriage, idolatry, sexual immorality, all manner of divisions in the church, and the eternal message of the power and wisdom of the cross.....

He still says, you better watch out! It is so easy to become a hollow person- with the name but without the real stuff inside. Do it all in love, just like Jesus did.

AMEN

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