

BE OUR CHURCH - SPEAK BOLDLY

Ordinary Time

Ephesians 6:10-20

A Sermon Preached by
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University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Kinan Oommen – Anthem for Sermon Speak Boldly

I wrote this and dedicated it to the case [Juliana v. U.S.]

They asked, "Will you help sue the state?"
I said, "I don't know what that means, but I think I'd like to try,
Because I'm worried about the pipelines across the rivers,
And the acid in the rain and the raw ashes in the sky."
So we said we have a plan and we won't back down.

They tried to scare us off but the oligarchy failed.
Justice it's been distracting from our studies.
Think when we try to find a job, can't drink the water, can't breathe the air.
I promise I always want to breathe the air.

Maybe this is hopeless but it doesn't get us down.
Build in the resistance with our friends in our home town.
I don't look to Washington. They never had my back.
And I know that I don't need to look that far.
I know that I don't need to look that far.

Louisiana, Jason's home, it keeps on flooding.
And the port is going under. And Hawaii's going, too.
And the fires burn hotter every year.
Still they want Jordan Cove¹ to pump their liquid natural gas
I am quite fed up with your gas.

Maybe this is hopeless but it doesn't get us down.
Build in the resistance with our friends in our home town.
I don't look to Washington. They never had my back.
And I know that I don't need to look that far.
I know that I don't need to look that far.

Three years later now we've got a date in court.
That doesn't mean we're done.
No, this fight is never done.

¹ *Jordan Cove is the builder of planned facility in Coos Bay, Oregon. Reference: Willamette Week, "The Oregon Department of Energy Recommends Denying Jordan Cove Liquefied Natural Gas Project an Exemption."*
<https://www.wweek.com>, accessed 9/1/2018.

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So I hope that I will see you in the streets.
Come on out, I'll meet you in the streets.

Maybe this is hopeless but it doesn't get us down.
Built in the resistance with our friends in our home town.
I don't look to Washington. They never had my back.
And I know that I don't need to look that far.
I know that I don't need to look that far.

(repeated)

You know that you don't need to look that far,
that far, ... that far, that far.

Pastor Amy Roon

Just a note before we hear the scripture. It's a reminder that it's always important to me when we read these letters of Paul that the timing -- Paul is always writing at a time when there is no He keeps talking as if there is a church like we understand this institution. But this is before we even have any of the gospel narratives written down. This is, as ... as one of my professors in seminary reminded me, she ... she would talk about it and say, "Early Christianity at this point is more like a 12-step group." [Chuckles] You laugh but very, very much it's a small group of people that have decided and come to the conclusion that life as they know it is unmanageable and that this way of following God will save their lives. And they are that desperate to keep meeting together and keep figuring out what that means. There's ... There isn't really a whole These are small communities reading these letters, having met Paul maybe some of them, some of them just hearing here is a way your life is going to be better. And they gather to read these letters from Paul to try to remember how to work that out and what to do.

Let's hear the Word from the Scripture.

Scripture – Read by Liturgists

Listen for the word of God.

Ephesians 6:10-20²

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of God's power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of 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. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all

² The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. (Adapted.)

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the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. 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, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak .

Pastor Amy Roon

I hope that each one of us has had some moment in their lives, likely unplanned. Maybe you knew you were supposed to speak. Maybe something was going on in the room. Maybe ... For me my first opportunities and moments were in classrooms where I saw someone being bullied -- or a teacher doing the bullying, subtly putting down another student for asking a question. And I don't know about you, but there's this, this, this ... you know -- it's probably how I ended up a preacher -- but there's a little thing here, right here in the core of my stomach, and I am terrified. I'm terrified, because in order to do something, I'm going to have to interrupt somebody. Everybody thinks this is ... I don't know ... the teacher's yelling at the student -- whatever is happening -- they're not there not waiting for me to do something. I just got this feeling then "You better stand up. You better say something."

One of the reasons I so constantly encourage the arts, one of the reasons I am so grateful that churches are still actively and continually, one of the radical things we do every single Sunday is *congregational singing*. You have .. yes! And that we do acts! We make art together regularly. Because it is the same practice of speaking up that is simply to add your voice to the hymn when you stand and sing. You get these tools to speak up, to be a part of community, to act on behalf of justice. You practice them right here.

And sometimes this language is a ... is a little awkward to me. ... And I'm reminded in this Scripture what I kept imagining ...

You know they've done, they've done studies now: standing like this, like a super hero, right? For ... I don't know how many seconds? How long do you have to stand here? [*Voice from audience: Three minutes.*] Three-minutes!! We've got to stand this way?? We're not going to do that! But to prepare yourselves and as hard and awkward as this language of ... this military language of *helmets* and *armor* is, we would be doing ourselves, our children, our community a dis=service, if we suggest it isn't necessary. When you speak on something sacred to you or on behalf of someone vulnerable -- or against the powers that be, be ready to be attacked. It will happen. So how do we arm one another with love and the spirit and give one another the confidence to speak boldly and to stand up?

I can honestly say that Kiran, of course, I did not know you ... I did not know you since you are wee thing [*as Pastor Catherine Foote did*], although I've already mentioned that, you know, he can try to connect with Benjamin who hears that all the time at annual meetings and such. *And* it's no small thing for me as a parent raising kids and knowing the busyness of Sunday and the, "Yep. You're going to do the call to worship this Sunday. Yep. Yep." Then we're going to do that ... I would be

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honored to have the children of this church and my own child speak up in ways that you have spoken up. ... I hand the pulpit to you.

Kiran Oommen

I was raised in the United Church of Christ, my mother is a minister, and I am a proud member of First Congregational Eugene, in Oregon.³ But full disclosure, I don't identify as christian⁴. My existentialist tendencies keep me in an apathetic agnosticism. As an anarchist, political philosopher Bakunin's aphorism "A Boss in Heaven is the best excuse for a boss on earth, therefore If God did exist, he would have to be abolished"⁵ kind of resonates with me. So after a full childhood of Sunday school, I have a funny relationship with the Bible. I am a strong proponent of collective leadership, and have little interest in rules I haven't agreed to follow. That being said, the metaphoric imagery of the Bible remains unparalleled – I am fascinated by this book. I don't think Bakunin read Ephesians 6:12, where Paul explicitly states that the struggle is *against* the rulers and authorities. Or perhaps he did read it, and thought he was calling out a biblical contradiction (such are the grandpa jokes for atheists, as you know, still amusing after the thousandth time they say them).

But I'm going to take it a step further, and say that armor is a metaphor to bring all struggles against oppression together. Whether God is love, an old man in the sky, or anything in between to you, this passage can be understood as a reference to our revolutionary toolkit. And that, well, that is what I like to talk about: What we need for ourselves so we can come together in collective resistance.

Some of my toolkit is literal – some days I like to wear armor. I've been working on this "breastplate of righteousness," or as the punks call it, my battle jacket [*black leather with chrome spikes and a picture of the Lorax*], for years, and it is a garment of many purposes. It keeps me warm, it makes me feel good, it's a fluid, living craft project I can take with me wherever I go. But also it *is* armor, making me feel safe and secure in myself particularly when I don't. Most importantly, however, it's a tool for community building. I stitch my politics and artistic taste (the two go hand in hand) across my chest and I make my body a flag of solidarity for unknown comrades wherever I go.

One of my favorite examples happened last fall when I was at the UNFCCC⁶ Conference of the Parties 23 in Bonn, Germany – or "COP23". I went as a delegate for Juliana vs. U.S.⁷ As you may know, I am a plaintiff on that case. One evening I found myself at a party with a number of other delegates and representatives from around the world, and as I wandered through the fancy suits and long dresses, a young woman noticed my out-of-place attire and pulled me aside. She confided in me that the Hambach Forest Occupation, a five-year tree-sit protecting the last remaining section of the forest,

³ Rev. Melanie Oommen, Associate Minister, First Congregational Church, Eugene, Oregon

⁴ Mr. Oommen chooses to write Christian with a lower-case "c" = christian, so we honor his practice in this here.

⁵ Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin (1814–1876), was a Russian revolutionary anarchist and founder of collectivist anarchism. From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Bakunin, accessed 9/6/2018. [Unable to locate original source of quote. I did look.]

⁶ UNFCCC: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is an international environmental treaty adopted on 5/9/1992 and opened for signature at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro from 6/3 to 6/14/1992. From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Framework_Convention_on_Climate_Change, accessed 9/6/2018.

⁷ "Youth filed their constitutional climate lawsuit, Juliana v. U.S., against the U.S. government in the U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon in 2015." From Our Children's Trust, accessed 9/12/2018 at <https://www.ourchildrenstrust.org/us/federal-lawsuit/>

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was in danger of being forcefully evicted for coal mining [by RWE] following the conference.⁸ She was trying to raise awareness about the occupation, so even the out-of-town environmentalists, such as those at the party, could show solidarity and hopefully deter the expansion of what is already the second largest open pit coal mine in the world. My jacket is a catalyzing tool, apparently: two strangers were able to plan and execute a banner drop in front of hundreds of people in a single evening and spent the rest of the night explaining our action – after the security took away our banner – to interested and sympathetic partiers.

But clothing is superficial. Isn't "righteousness" the really interesting word here? Another word for a post-Christian like myself to stumble on, that is. Nowadays righteousness is often misinterpreted to be synonymous with *self-righteousness*, but as my seminarian parents remind me, in Hebrew righteousness is synonymous not with pretentiousness but justice. Justice is a word the Christians *and* the anarchists can get behind. We have to wear *justice* on our chests! "Arm the Lorax" – as I have on my chest – is a funny punk rock metaphor that means –to me – "empower those who speak for justice to act."⁹ And this is where we get to our case.

For those who don't know, Juliana v. U.S. is a lawsuit filed by twenty-one youth, ages ten to 22, represented by the law nonprofit Our Children's Trust based in Eugene, Oregon against the U.S. federal government to make them accountable for the countless actions they have taken to support the fossil fuel industry for the last 50-odd years at the detriment of every living thing on earth.

The US government has consistently chosen the side of money and the wealthy over the rights of the people in the health of the planet. They argue that it is the legislators' job to decide environmental policy, not the court's. But if that is so, the legislators have failed in their duties and more importantly, *why* would the same people who have always chosen money in a system that rewards that choice do any differently? Our enemies are the rulers, the authorities, and the cosmic powers of this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. To me that means the status quo, the establishment, the system that put us here in the first place.

Youth represent the purest opposite to that. They don't need money, they live outside the games of power, they believe in the worlds they create themselves. *Youth believe in the worlds they create themselves*. And that's why it's youth who are bringing climate change right into the face of the Trump Administration. We don't care about the power games. We can't logically justify corruption even to ourselves. But we do want to breathe clean air as long as we live – and this past week every breathe I took working outside each day was full of ash. *Ash! All that remains of whatever justice our government was founded on.*

The system never gave me anything to believe in, especially when so much else that I grew up with does. The UCC church raised me to see social justice as the ultimate goal of life, and those values inform my actions daily. In the UCC, one does not choose to be an organizer, one lives a life of

⁸ Hambach Forest (German: Hambacher Forst, Bürgewald, Die Bürge) is a forest located in North Rhine-Westphalia, western Germany, between Cologne and Aachen. The forest is nearly 12,000 years old, rich in biodiversity and home to 142 species regarded as important for conservation. RWE is a German energy company. From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hambach_Forest, accessed 9/6/2018.

⁹ *The Lorax* is a children's book written by Dr. Seuss and first published in 1971.^[1] It chronicles the plight of the **environment** and the Lorax, who speaks for the trees against the Once-ler. As in most Dr. Seuss works, most of the creatures mentioned are original to the book. From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lorax, accessed 9/06/2018.

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organizing from soup kitchens to homeless shelters to making community space for all to be welcome. The simple act of singing songs together in a community of three or more generations is political. My comfort organizing and being together with a diversity of ages is a staple in my revolutionary tool kit.

And that's what this about, building up each other as individuals so we can fight together collectively. Paul's writing is personal, as if to a friend, but his letter was not to an individual but a community.

Anarchists say mutual aid, Christians say fellowship, but ultimately that's what our toolkits are for. Our *belts* represent the climatologists who have found the facts and figures about climate change to take to the courts. The truth that holds up our arguments because science cannot be argued. *Breastplates* are the values we hold in our hearts, the passion fostered in our communities that push us out to do this work of making the world a better place. I wear these *boots* [*black, high top and laced*] in the hope that they will scare nazis¹⁰ and impress my friends, but even if that's just in my head, they're fun boots. Our *shields* of faith, *helmets* of salvation, *swords* of spirit, those may be different things for each one of us, but that's how we can relate. We all need these **toolkits** to work together, no matter how different we may be.

Today , my faith, my salvation, and my fighting spirit are in my youthfulness – not in age but in attitude. Anarchist activist and author Voltarine du Cleyre wrote in 1903, "Would you always be young? Then be an anarchist, and live with the faith of hope, though you be old."¹¹ I say, believe in the world we're creating ourselves.

Thank you. [*Followed by cheering from the congregation.*]

Amy Roon

Now here is the beauty of a diverse church. We are not calling for each of you to speak boldly the same message. We're calling for you to listen to what you understand justice to be and speak it boldly. And that beauty is that we can live in this world that there's all this anxiety, but that just means that there will be a lot of yelling and no one will be listening -- unless we're singing. And when we sing we practice the ability to sing and make sound and listen at the same time. What a radically inclusive way that we can say "sing your passion wherever you are and join your voice."

Closing prayer [sung]

Stand, Oh-oh, stand firm,
Stand, Oh-oh, stand firm.
Stand, Oh-oh, stand firm
And see what the Lord can do

UCUCC: AR & KO

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from <https://universityucc.org/resources/sermons>
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¹⁰ Mr. Oommen chose to write it this way; we honor his choice.

¹¹ Voltairine de Cleyre (1866–1912) was a prominent American anarchist, known for being a prolific writer and speaker, and opposing capitalism, the state, marriage, and the domination of religion over sexuality and women's lives. From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voltairine_de_Cleyre, accessed 9/06/2018.