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Text: Ephesians 6:10-20

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters, the epistle to the Ephesians offers us a remarkable vision of the church of Jesus Christ. It would have been the great joy of the author to see us today in Bulawayo, a worshipping congregation gathered in God's name from all corners of the world; a congregation like the one in Ephesus, "no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:19ff).

This vision of a communion constituted by both Jews and Christians is still a major challenge for Christians in Europe, and especially for us in Germany because our history, through the Holocaust, is inextricably bound with that of the Jews. It is only through numerous Jewish-Christian dialogues that we have found that the hope the epistle to the Ephesians offers - a great vision of the church and of the promised reality of co-citizenship in the kingdom of God - can not be destroyed, even though our histories are ridden with guilt.

It is God, in his Son Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit, who creates this church; its existence is not founded through us. The situation of that young church in Ephesus is remarkably similar to ours:

This is a time of uncertainty. In Europe the overwhelming religious plurality and incommensurability of world views have brought about a loss of orientation. Everywhere you will find people searching for meaning.

It is a time of gathering. The churches in Europe are becoming smaller and smaller. They have to gather themselves anew, since they cannot have a continued existence merely on the basis of a long Christian tradition.

It is a time of orientation. The upheaval in which we find ourselves also contains within it the seeds of renewal which can lead to a new consolidation. Convictions are no longer shared just because of a culture that was shaped by Christianity. They have to be gained anew.

At this time, the church, not only in Europe but also this communion of the worldwide church of Jesus Christ representatively gathered in Bulawayo, can be strengthened if we
allow ourselves to be guided by the vision in the letter to the Ephesians.

This letter is addressed to us! It ends with a great call to battle: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his 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 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" (6:10-20).

This passage calls upon us, the church, to put on the armor of God. At first glance, this military imagery is for us Mennonites and Brethren in Christ rather foreign, since we describe ourselves as "historic peace churches" and this is how other churches perceive us. This text, however, clears up misunderstandings since it is clearly not talking about a conventional battle against flesh and blood.

The enemies in this text are real: "rulers and authorities," "cosmic powers" - or at least those who make such claims for themselves. Whoever plays the role of a "ruler or authority" has, from the perspective of the church, a relativized power because the church believes in one Lord, Jesus Christ, who is love and mercy. Be it international terrorists who attempt to rule the world through their attacks; be it a superpower which thinks it can afford to isolate itself from other countries and wage preemptive wars in the name of creating a better world through violence; be it the governments in our different countries - yes, also in Europe! - who think they can preserve their power without serving the welfare of all, especially the weakest among us; or be it, finally, those in our churches who think they can use their power to pursue their own interests, these are the enemies to which Ephesians is referring.

I believe a deeper truth hidden in this passage makes clear why we ought not battle against the flesh by spilling blood. All these claims to power have a deeper cause; namely, the temptation to use power against the will of others and to suppress others so one is not obliged to share power. We are all exposed to this temptation! Even Jesus had to battle against this temptation as the devil in the desert offered him all power (Luke 4). We experience this temptation continually in common circumstances: in the family where
husbands dominate their wives (and sometimes wives their husbands!) and parents their children, sometimes to discourage them. In our jobs, those who want to climb the ladder are poised to use their power to the disadvantage of their colleagues. Yet we yearn for healthy relationships which are characterized by the renunciation of power, for a community in which power is distributed for the common welfare and not possessed by a small minority. My hope is that the church can become such a community and that through her our societies will become places of healthy relationships.

Let us not misunderstand what is written in Ephesians. It is not talking only about inner battles amidst ourselves, as if the only thing that matters is a morally pure church. Hardly. Terror, war, starvation, corruption and torture are the real results of the arrogant use of power. The church of Jesus Christ can not be silent in the face of such realities with Ephesians in our Bible.

Let me be clear. The church does not aim to destroy these authorities. It wishes, rather, to expose those temptations which lurk behind them, so that all can be freed from the compulsion to rule others by suppression. The church's battle is not against persons; it is not aimed at the destruction of the rulers and authorities of this world, but rather their liberation from lurking temptation. The goal is not victory over those authorities, but rather the establishment of a reconciled community in which power is shared. It is precisely in this way that the vicious cycle of power and violence will be broken. That is the church's mission.

What does this battle look like? What resources are at our disposal to effect such liberation? Ephesians presents us with the "armor of God," pieces of armor conspicuously for defense with the exception of the last piece. "The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" appears to be the only weapon suitable for attack. The word of God, however, is not the church's sword; it is the Spirit's sword. If we do not pay exact attention to the language in Ephesians the intention of the text will escape us. We know this from our mission history: Europeans have often been violent missionaries in North and South America, in Asia, and also in Africa. How could that have happened? In part due to a false interpretation of this text, by thinking that the church itself possessed the word of God as sword. This is not the case. The word of God is the sword of the Spirit, not of the church!

Not all in the church have sinned here. At all times there have been believers who knew precisely that the church was not to pick up the sword. I am grateful that at the roots of our Mennonite tradition people understood this. I am glad for the continual conviction to renounce violence in our tradition, even if this conviction has not been adopted in every place and at every time. We cannot give up on this conviction which is so deeply inscribed in our confessional memory. Not because we are traditionalists, in love with every minute detail of our Mennonite history; not because we romanticize Anabaptists of the sixteenth century; rather because we have today discovered this truth anew through the study of the Word of God by which the Spirit wishes to lead us.

We take up the challenge of this battle in a new way today because the circumstances
have changed. We detect this clearly in Europe. At the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement and Mennonite faith, those who wanted conscientiously to follow Jesus were required to pull out of their societies. Our ancestors were persecuted, tortured, and killed. Their battle was for survival. Only later were they tolerated and sometimes even welcomed, not because people shared their convictions, but because they were seen as an economic stimulus for underdeveloped regions. My ancestors went from Prussia to Russia to live out their religious convictions, including pacifism. When they lost everything in Russia, they fled to South America to start from scratch once again in a small niche in that society, the "silent in the country."

Today I live as a Mennonite in Germany, in a democracy with legally guaranteed freedom of conscious and freedom of religion. This is a totally different situation from that of my ancestors. What does the battle look like today? A retreat out of this open society would mean giving up on the "battle of the faith." Today we have the opportunity to confess our faith in public, to introduce our convictions to a wide audience and to help reform our society. Many of our fathers and mothers interpreted pacifism as the refusal to defend oneself. There was often no other possibility. However in an open, democratic society which grants the church an active role in shaping the future of our society, pacifism has to take on other forms. We, like everyone else, will now be exposed to the temptation to exercise power over others. But this temptation has always been present also in small, removed Mennonite communities. For this reason we need to examine the "armor of God" anew if a guideline for our ecclesial existence is to emerge.

"Fasten your waists with truth." Truth is a key for all attempts at reconciliation. Without truth there can be no reconciliation, as we have learned from our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world. The "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" in South Africa is an example. Even though the Commission's work has been criticized (some restoration payments are still outstanding), it has shown us that the paths to reconciliation are paved with speaking and listening to truth. When injustice has been done, you cannot hope to wipe the slate clean and start again if no one takes responsibility or publicly acknowledges wrong doing. This is also true for relations among church traditions. Therefore we are thankful for the ongoing dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Mennonite World Conference. The dialogue is an example of seeking reconciliation and healing through truth.

After the Second World War, a new start in Germany was possible only after the truth of its guilt came to light, guilt for the majority of Christians in Germany and for Mennonites. It is true that the Association of German Mennonite Congregations proudly announced when the war began that all its eligible men were ready for military service!

The wider community of sisters and brothers from Mennonite Central Committee and through the worldwide ecumenical community welcomed us back into their midst and helped us to reorient ourselves theologically. "Fasten your waists with truth." The truth will protect us from the temptation to be silent in the face of committed injustices, be they ours or those of others.
The "breastplate of righteousness" is the second piece of the church's armor. Righteousness is the state of being just. We believers support justice, not because we follow a general principle, nor because we think that everyone at every time and in every place ought to be treated equally, but because we have experienced the justice of God. This justice encompasses far more than equal treatment. God's justice includes compassion. God's justice does not repay us in accordance with our crimes and sins, but establishes a new relationship between us and God. God justifies us, the sinners, and thereby establishes a law that makes a community possible. That is why we stand up for justice. We are not aiming for punishment or revenge but for the possibility of a reconciled community. This is "restorative justice," or "transformative justice." Victims and offenders have to be freed from their roles and transformed into a new relationship which can break the vicious cycle of violence.

We usually start this transforming process by naming the injustices. Mennonites in Europe, in ecumenical communion with other churches, are participating in efforts to relieve the debts of the poorest countries so that available money is funneled into medical care and education. We call our governments to increase aid given to disadvantaged countries. With other churches, we are searching for ways to support especially southern Africa in its battle against HIV/AIDS because we have recognized that the unjust distribution of goods is a main reason for the rapid spread of this pandemic. The "breastplate of righteousness" ought to protect us from self-centered ignorance of unjust structures,

"As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." Ephesians continues with a description of the armor of believers. The gospel of peace is not accidentally associated with "going," for peace is not a condition arrived at once and for all, but a journey, a continuous battle. We are called to proclaim this Gospel against all the other so-called prophets who call out 'Peace, peace" but where no peace can be found. Our gospel calls upon us to offer the left cheek when the right one has been struck, to give up our coat when someone wants our tunic, and to go the second mile. Our gospel calls upon us to give whatever is asked of us, and not to turn away from someone who would like to borrow from us. Indeed, it demands us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us.

This gospel calls into question all attempts to achieve peace through revenge. Violence does not achieve peace, even when it stops conflicts for a moment. We continually see this on the African continent with civilians so horribly suffering in its regional wars. We should not allow ourselves to be deceived, believing that violent intrusion from outside, be it from Europe or North America, can establish peace. The evil deeds of others does not legitimize the injustice which we would commit were we to abandon the way of non-violence, even with the best intentions.

But, turning away, doing nothing, being the "silent in the country" can also be transgressions of the way of peace. That truth is clearer for us today than ever before. We become guilty if, out of concern for our own peace-loving convictions, we do not provide aid to those threatened by violence. This is the dilemma of the gospel of peace in a world
which does not live in accordance with the reality of God's kingdom. We stand in the middle, as the church of Jesus Christ. The epistle to the Ephesians encourages us not simply to accept this situation or to retreat cosily into our little communities, but to be prepared for battle.

But it does not send us into battle without the armor of God, given to us through faith. We are told not to defeat evil with evil but to overcome it with good. The way of peace is active, full of dangers, but not without protection! Faith, the trust that God's possibilities do not end where ours do, does not allow us to succumb to a false dichotomy: to use violence or to do nothing. The way of peace always searches for an alternative. There are numerous examples: Christian Peace-Maker-Teams; civil instead of military service; relationship building between entrenched enemies, possible through the worldwide ecumenical community of churches; cooperation with governmental and non-governmental institutions to establish non-violent, active, conflict-resolution alternatives.

Friends, this is not easy! It is not for nothing that Ephesians chooses the metaphor of battle. It calls upon the church to be the messenger of reconciliation to protect the victims and liberate the offenders. The "shield of faith" and the "helmet of salvation" have been given to resist evil and to survive the battle.

Let me remind you that there was a time when all believed that slavery could not be overcome, that it was natural. But then Christians got involved in the movement for abolition because they recognized that slavery contradicted the gospel of peace and people were ready to share power.

There was a time when all believed that Apartheid could not be overcome. But Christians in the whole world showed solidarity and worked to dismantle Apartheid because they knew that in the gospel of peace these boundaries had already been bridged. And there were people ready to share power.

There was a time when no one thought that the Berlin wall in Germany would fall without a war. But people, Christians and non-Christians, started to walk peacefully down the streets because they knew that this wall stood for injustice, against the gospel of peace. And there were people ready to share power.

There was a time when all believed that social injustices in times of economic globalization could not be changed. There was a time when all believed that there would always be wars in this world.

Sisters and brothers, we do not have the slightest idea of what lies in the realm of the possible for the ones who believe in this gospel of peace!

However, to testify to our faith in such difficult situations, a strong community is needed. We are too weak to live according to this vision on our own. Ephesians tells us: "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints" (6:18). Once again emerges
the great vision of the church in which the "dividing wall of hostility" (2:14) is torn down in Christ. And we, who have the privilege to participate in this world conference in Bulawayo experience that truth directly. We perceive the power of this beautiful communion where the boundaries of culture, language, skin color, sex, and age dissolve. "There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (4:4-6).

Two challenges are put to us at the end of the epistle to the Ephesians:
We are all challenged to be church back home. The challenges in Germany are quite different from those in Zimbabwe, those in Canada are different from those in Ethiopia, those in Brazil are different from those in Indonesia. But it makes no difference where we live in the world. We do not rely only on ourselves. We request and plead to God in the Spirit not only for ourselves, but also "persistently...for all the saints" (6:18). Nothing is so tragic for a congregation as the feeling of isolation when threatened. The strength we need in our congregations to live the gospel of peace in an authentic manner will be granted to us in the worldwide Mennonite communion. Ephesians challenges us: Because we are joined together in one Spirit we will suffer when one member of this body suffers and we will rejoice when one member rejoices. We will battle when one member has to battle and, in all things, be accountable to and pray for one another.

To do this effectively, we need to know more about one another and share the gifts God has given to us. How else can we be a trustworthy testimony in the world? It does not suffice that a handful of us meets every six or seven years for a conference. We need to express far more strongly that we are a worldwide communion of congregations. It is precisely in our Mennonite tradition that the element of community is so heavily stressed. This community reaches far beyond our local congregational boundaries.
Dear brothers and sisters, if we take this seriously, a loose association does not suffice. We ought to be, on the basis of theological convictions and ecclesiological vision, a Mennonite World Communion.

What prevents us from becoming a world communion? Our diversity? Our differences? Our various ways of piety? Diversity is precisely what makes a communion! We are not searching for uniformity, but a communion which interprets and enriches this diversity. We are not looking for an ecclesiastical hierarchy which will dictate to our congregations what and how we ought to believe. We are looking for servants who will support our congregations so that we do not lose sight of one another once we leave Bulawayo. To pray for one another also implies to be responsible for another. If it is not so, then our prayers for one another are nothing but empty chatter. Let us proceed into a world communion. There is no other corrective for Mennonite congregations than the communion of congregations which examines the will of God and encourages one another to live in accordance with it. I am glad that our General Council has approved further steps in this direction.

The second challenge put to us in the letter to the Ephesians is that of the universal church, the communion of all saints. One expression of this worldwide communion is the
World Council of Churches. It was founded in 1948 out of the conviction that if the church of Jesus Christ wants to live according to its calling in the world, individual church bodies have to stop fighting one another and start to build sisterly relations with each other. How we relate to other churches depends on whether we do justice to the claim in Ephesians to be one body and to the gospel of peace. Some German and Dutch Mennonite congregations were part of the WCC from its founding because they shared this vision and believed that through it we were one step closer to realizing the worldwide communion of churches. The Communauté Mennonite au Congo also became a member of WCC.

There are many reasons why Mennonites have been skeptical about the ecumenical movement: historically, other churches have often been our persecutors; other churches cultivate a different sort of ecclesial existence; we have little interest in institutions and theological debates; perhaps we fear that our identity will be lost in the ecumenical movement.

I can speak only from the experience of German Mennonites and those from the Netherlands. We are amazed at how churches in the ecumenical fellowship of the World Council welcome us, by the startling diversity which prevails there as richness of the church, and especially how much we have been able to learn about ourselves. Our identity has become clearer. Identity is not preserved by isolation but by encounter and relation!

Here is another challenge: We want to invite you to share with us in the task of introducing our Mennonite convictions to this ecumenical fellowship of churches! We invite you to share with us the gift of this worldwide ecumenical community. We invite you to examine if membership in this fellowship of churches is a possible expression of the church that prays and is concerned for one another as it is portrayed in the letter to the Ephesians. This fellowship of churches in the WCC is not uniformity but a communion, living in reconciled diversity. It is not the Kingdom of God on earth. It is, however, a strong expression of the truth that we are all joined to one another into one body in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

May God bless us all by making known his will. May God grant us to become what we already are in God's eyes: justified in God's love, true followers of Jesus Christ, and partakers in the larger communion of all saints, created and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

Amen.