

Suited Up

Proper 16, Year B – Ephesians 6:10-20

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, August 23, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul, and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Back when I was in fifth grade at Sevilla Elementary School in our suburban northwest corner of Phoenix, Arizona, my best friend was Rodney Martin.

Now I don't know if it's still true today, but back then, ten-year-old boy-best-frienddom was *usually* defined by the frequency of sleep overs at one friend's house or the other. By that metric, I suppose my best friend would have been David Deal, whose family went to church with mine. Though I don't remember too many times when David came to join the bedlam at the Martindales', my memory is *rife* with occasions where we conspired in ten-year-old, "His mom says it's okay, if *you* say it's okay," invitations to join the Deals between morning and evening services – oh yes, we went *twice* on Sunday – we were *real* Christians – or even for Saturdays together with delivery Sunday morning. I certainly remember enjoying the respite from my siblings, and I think only-child David enjoyed the company. The problem was that David's family lived on the east side of the valley, near or in the now much more famous Scottsdale suburb, so except for church and our visits, I literally never saw him through the week.

By contrast, I can only remember one time that I spent the night at Rodney's. Dodging the unwanted attention of his only sibling, a third-grade brother whose name, I *think*, was Larry, Rodney's dad gave us clearance to sleep out in the back yard – in Rodney's *tree* house! We ended up moving back inside to my friend's room about ten o'clock, when Rodney zigged when he should have zagged, and ended up on the ground, the *very* hard way, resulting in the kind of tears that are reserved to exactly such occasions among ten-year-old boys. What's worse, Rodney had been showing me a *special* deck of cards he had found in his dad's dresser, so we spent the next couple of sleepless hours speculating that his fall was some sort of divine retribution for our pre-pubescent lustful thoughts – but that's a whole *'nother* story.

Anyway, what Rodney *did* have going for him, in the best friend department, was that he lived on 37th Avenue between Montibello and San Juan, one street down from the Martindale estate at 3828 W. San Miguel. What's more, he was Rodney *Martin*, which means that for *years* I sat right behind or right next to him five days a week. He pretty much *had* to be my best friend. Well, until Vince Marone joined us in sixth grade, Gayle *Maynard* usually sat on the other side of me, but *that* made any difference to me until eighth grade – but *again*, that's another story.

The story that I thought of this week as I was thinking of this morning's reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, happened at *our* end of the block one as-usual-hot-as-you-know-where Phoenix summer afternoon. A bunch of us had gathered to play a game that, as far as I know, was unique to our little corner of the Valley of the Sun – a kid-developed mash-up of dodgeball and soccer, with hockey thrown in if we were thinking of the then-new – well, the then-*existent*, *Phoenix Roadrunners*. The teams were chosen up in the time-honored boy process of choosing captains, deciding one-potato-two-potato who got to choose first, and then calling out names until everybody was on a team – except little Doug, my youngest brother, who at four, was a little too little for street hockey. And anyway, he was the odd-man-out. That didn't mean he didn't get to play with us, though. Beside the designated goalie, everyone else in our matches played in the middle of San Miguel Avenue was on offense, but *someone* had to be the designated watcher, and anytime one came around either corner, Doug was pretty good at yelling, "CAR!"

I remember I was a little ticked off that afternoon. Marty Brussels had declined our usual custom of being one of the captains with Leon Scandino, leaving me to captain the second team. And no sooner had Leon won one-potato, than he immediately called out Marty, leaving the only two twelve-year-olds in

the neighborhood on the *same* team, and only younger kids available for draft by yours truly. Even at ten, I smelled a conspiracy. I could have, maybe *should* have, chosen my brother Danny next. But Rodney Martin had made the round-the-block trip to our end of the block, and *hey*, he *was* my best friend. Danny was the better pick. Even a year younger, Danny was a better athlete than Rodney. Heck, my seven-year-old *sister* Becky was a better athlete than my friend Rodney, who had a chubby doughy-ness that usually had him picked close to last in school choose-ups, often even after the *shortest* guy in class – that was me. Anyway, I knew what it was like not being picked, so I picked him first, because he was my best friend.

Among his other athletic short-comings, Rodney was not a very quick runner, and his stamina was, well... well, he didn't have any. So by mutual consent, it was decided that Rodney should tend the goal, a stack of cardboard boxes – three points if the ball went in the top box, two points in the middle, and one in the bottom. Right from the whistle – which wasn't so much a whistle as a, "Go!" – our team was *doomed*. We did okay when we had the ball, passing it to each other pretty well, and keeping it away from the other guys to move it down the street. With Leon, the biggest big-kid on our block, guarding the opposing goal, though, we just couldn't score. If he didn't catch the ball outright, he had a broom handle to bat it aside, and he knew how to use it. And when *they* got the ball, if they got it down to our goal, they pretty much put up points every time. It wasn't just that Rodney wasn't doing a very good job stopping the ball, he never really *tried* to stop the ball. To be fair, since we ruined the first dodgeball kind of ball we used playing on the asphalt, we used a *basketball* to play our game. If you've ever been *hit* by a basketball, you know already why Rodney too-readily yielded the goal after his first attempt at a block. But I was embarrassed, for Rodney, *and* for me.

Now, there was no one keeping time, there never *was*, but about the second time Dougy yelled, "CAR!" we decided we all needed a break from the heat to get a drink from the hose, and we declared half-time. But while everyone else sitting back in what little shade they could find in Davey Tank's dichondra front lawn, Rodney shouted over his shoulder that he would be right back. When everyone had been thoroughly watered, and the tired panting had turned back into *trash*-talk, we all wandered back out onto the street, wondering what had happened to my best-friend and sometime goalie. And then we all looked at Dougy who was pointing open-mouthed toward the east end of the block, and then followed his gaping expression and pointing finger.

There, as if from the mists of a Super Bowl pregame show, or J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, or Wagner's *Valhalla*, strode Rodney Martin, *ready* for battle. He was covered nearly from neck to foot with one of those chest protector pads worn by baseball catchers, only this one would have been worn by a much *larger* baseball catcher. I think it would have actually been dragging on the ground, if it weren't for an Army equipment belt cinched tight around his pudgy waist. He had tucked his pants into his black and white high-top Keds as if they were combat boots, and had secured them with shiny silver duct tape. In his left hand, my best friend held a garbage can lid – the heavy, galvanized kind that were the only thing we had back then – and in his right, he held the signed Louisville Slugger that I had admired many times in its home on a plaque in the Martin's den. And to top it off, my friend, our goalie, THE Goalie of all time, wore a football helmet that was so big that it made him look like a bobble-head doll with each deliberate stride – I suspected it was yet another acquisition from his father's room, but I didn't care. I was proud to be Rodney Martin's best friend.

Our team still lost, and we lost *big*. In the second half, Rodney was scored on with most of our opponents' shots-on-goal. But my best friend Rodney never flinched – not even once.

"Take up the whole armor of God," Paul said, "to stand firm." "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."

"Be careful," Paul said last week, "Be careful how you live." From the mists of the waters of Baptism, and washed clean by the Blood of the everlasting covenant, in the name of Christ, we stride

through this world of uncertainty and danger, my friends, *not* as naked, helpless children, but armed for *victory*. We are wrapped from head to foot in holiness and righteousness, not because we *deserve* it, but precisely because we do *not*, not because of our *worthiness*, but because the victory is already ours through *his* victory. For peace *and* for battle, we are armed in one hand with centuries of the faith of the great cloud of witnesses to God's mercy, grace and love, and with nothing less than God's own final word of love in the other. We are, even *now*, *crowned* with salvation not earned by our own paltry faults and failings and flinching from the fight, but the absolute *gift* of our Father in Heaven, the assurance that our price has been paid, once and for all, by the Cross of Calvary and by the empty tomb. And we are shod, you and I, with the beautiful feet of prophets, and apostles, and martyrs, charged with the call to run faster and jump higher to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to the whole world, *and* to our little corner of the Valley.

“Be strong in the Lord,” the Apostle concludes, “and in the strength of *his* power.”