Text: Mark 7:14-23, Eph 6:10-20, Onward Christian Soldiers

**Introduction**

If you are ever in want of a rabbit hole to go down, a rabbit hole of immense size and curious interest, start with our opening hymn for the day and the hymn writer Sabine Baring-Gould. I’d dare to say you could lose a full week and not really come to the end of this warren hole. And that week wouldn’t even include Arther Sullivan the composer of the hymn tune. Yes, he is that Sullivan, of Gilbert and Sullivan and the Pirates of Penzance – I am the very model of the modern major general.

Just scratching the surface Baring-Gould is lovingly described as an eclectic scholar. One of those types that the old English Empire used to throw off. Seemingly competent in everything he did, but maybe rather odd, but then again not really in harmful ways. Let me just pick out a couple of nooks of the warren. The Gould name, estate and arms dates back to 1217. A John Gould was granted title and estate for his heroism during the 5th Crusade. Onward Chistian Soldiers. The most enduring Baring-Gould work, after the hymn, was his work on folk songs of Western England. Published in four volumes in 1889 it would be adopted, refined, republished and spend nearly 60 years as a staple of English schooling. And it is not really finished. In the official publication Baring-Gould had cleaned up the language of the songs for the current taste, but a treasure trove in his original hand was found on the Gould estate in 1998 spurred further publication just in 2011 of the complete collection. He seems to have been the first eternal student. Admitted to Cambridge in 1852, he didn’t leave until 1860 with a lone Bachelor’s later upgraded to a masters. And he seems to have only discovered around then – I can imagine about the time it became clear to his dad that, no, he was not becoming a Don and the money spigot got turned off - a desire to be ordained. He spends another 4 years teaching at a boys school before being ordained and appointed to the office. In what may have been the most scandalous part, at age 30, the year he was ordained and appointed, Baring-Gould falls for Grace Taylor, the daughter of a mill hand, and all of 14 years old. But before we are too scandalized, they were married for 48 years until her death and had 15 children, all of whom survived into adulthood. Baring-Gould carved into her tombstone the epitaph “Half My Soul.”

I’ll shut up about Baring-Gould, but it really is a magnificent rabbit hole. And also another example of the wonderous differences of the saints. Billy Joel might have thought that the sinners were much more fun, but honestly the sinners are boringly monotonous. Maybe fun for a night, until the bill comes due. The saints meanwhile are as fascinating as Baring-Gould. And Onward Christian Soldiers, as he admitted later in life, maybe tiring of its popularity and the conflict it often seemed to inspire, is something he dashed off in 15 minutes. Written for a processional hymn for kids at his first parish, and it largely stayed there. Until Sullivan wrote the tune we sing it to and paired them as part of his Boer War Te Deum. It was grabbed by Teddy Roosevelt as the hymn for the Bull-Moose Progressive Party when he ran for President in 1912. It was used by Churchill at the start of the speech announcing his meeting with another Roosevelt and the US entry into WW2. And it is those types of associations and the honest martial virtue that most of the mainline protestants starting in the 1970s to exile it from their hymnbooks. The ELCA managed that with their most recent.

**Text**

But at least to me there is a two-fold problem with that exile. The first part problem is that such martial language is used all over the bible. As much as 1970’s Mainline Protestants, and let’s be very explicit here, as much as a couple generations of mainline clergy were uncomfortable with such language, it is biblical. And the second problem I’d say is that it is exactly this martial language gone missing that has so weakened the Protestant Faith.

To try and give those clergy some of the benefit of the doubt. They were all against the Vietnam War. Most of them, maybe a bit like Sabine-Gould, came from the class of folks who got college deferments, not the class that got drafted. A telling joke at the time was the stupendous number of people who found they were thinking about holy orders, again like Sabine-Gould, when graduation and deferment’s end was staring at them. Fogerty might have written Fortunate Son thinking about David Eisenhower, but it could have been just as much about Al Gore a senator’s son and enrollee at Vanderbilt Seminary in 1969. And so pointing at martial virtues, while racking up deferments, might have felt like stolen honor.

But the Apostle Paul’s reminder and image is one of battle. “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Put on the whole armor of God.”

**Christology**

But before we get to that I think we have to hear Jesus for a second. “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts” and the entire litany of evil actions. And it is these evil things that defile a person.

Before we don the cross and join the crusade, we must understand the condition of our heart. We have to understand what we are fighting with. The real location of the rulers, and authorities and cosmic powers is the human heart. The powers that be find a comfortable abode right here. And if we believe Jesus, that natural human heart doesn’t even really need those powers. It will produce such works by itself. Our great enemies are the devil, the world and our own flesh. But we don’t need “the devil made me do it” most of the time, although he is there.

And this is the application by the Holy Spirit of the Work of Jesus. That cross exposes the sin. Before one can Don the cross in martial virtue, one has to apply it to themselves. The Holy Spirit convinces us of what we say at the start of the service. “we have sinned in thought word and deed and we cannot free ourselves from this sinful condition.” And it is to that person – the spiritually poor - that the Holy Spirit applies the righteousness of Christ. We believe in one baptism for the remission of sins. In those waters all your sins were washed away. In those waters you have been made a new creation. And it is that same Holy Spirit that takes that baptized child of God and give them a clean heart and a right spirit. The heart from which all those evil things comes out has been replaced. You’ve had a spiritual heart transplant.

We stand not in our own strength, but we are “strong in the LORD and in the strength of his might.”

**Moral**

And it is that Christian who can take up those martial virtues. It is that Christian who fastens on the whole armor of God.

And this is where I believe recent Protestant preaching needs its corrective. It is not works righteousness to tell you to stand in the armor. Paul wants and expects the saints of God to be able to take up the sword and the shield. Paul expects martial vigilance. “Keep alert with all perseverance, making supplications.”

If you have a bible at home, look up the phrase “do not be deceived.” You’ll find a list like what Jesus says comes out of the human heart. But we’ve been given that new heart. And we should not be deceived. We must fight against the old Adam, the old heart, in us. Most of our Christian fight is not against Satan. He’s not ours. You see Satan coming, pray. Ours is the battle for holiness within our hearts. Put on the breastplate of righteousness. Guard your hearts.

Recognize when those evil thoughts arise and fight them. Do not let them grow into the actions that defile.

**Eschatological**

We need that martial language because we are in the midst of a struggle. We struggle daily with Satan, the world and our old hearts.

In my head I always connect Baring-Gould’s hymn with a line from another great hymn. And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph song, then hearts are brave again and arms are strong.

Onward Christian Soldiers is a form of that distant triumph song. Crowns and thrones may perish, Kingdoms rise and wane, but the church of Jesus constant will remain.

Redeemed and standing, we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. We look for when all those crowns and thrones will become Christ’s. We look for that day when Christ will raise his scepter decreeing endless peace.

Today, we need the martial language. The war isn’t over. It happens in your life. But the hymn steals on the ear. Onward then ye faithful, join the happy throng. It’s a route. And Satan’s time is short. Amen.