There is usually some resistance on the part of preachers to contrast military life with our Christian life. I am no exception. Understandably, there are difficulties because the military life more often than not leads to engagement in violent confrontation. It is a controversial subject, to say the least, because Christ has called us to be peacemakers and peacekeepers, and Christ’s own life was an example of non-violent resistance to the religious establishment of his day. However, the analogy between the military life and Christian life is a biblical one and not to be ignored.

The Epistle lesson for today from Ephesians chapter 6 is a clear indicator of the parallels between the disciples of Jesus Christ and soldiers in an army. Christian hymn writers have picked up this theme, for example, *Onward Christian Soldiers, Fight the Good Fight, Am I a Soldier of the Cross, Soldiers of Christ Arise and Put Your Armor On.* Putting aside any focus on war and violence for this sermon, there are some very helpful similarities.

As an 18 year old conscript in the army in South Africa, I remember being told the marks of a good soldier. I think it can be summed up by saying that a good soldier is one who stands tall, stands firm, and stands together with others in the army. I wonder how we as Christ’s soldiers measure up to these characteristics of a good soldier. Let’s look at each in turn:

As disciples of Christ, as “Soldiers of the Cross,” do we stand tall? It has been said that the most significant thing about Christianity is not so much the theological belief that God is all-knowing, but the personal experience that God knows me and you. (*Use the illustration here of Karl Barth who responded to the question about the most significant theological insight that he had gained from years of theological scholarship was that “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”*)

Listen: it is this awareness and assurance that God knows and loves YOU that enables you to stand tall and with the dignity of God upon your face. So many people today have little or no self-worth. They may have been devalued or diminished over the years by uncaring or
indifferent, possibly in extreme instances abusive, parents, friends, teachers, fellow-students, co-workers, spouses. Part of the solution to this tragic problem is, I believe, an awareness and assurance that God loves them.

It is when we stand tall in the knowledge of God’s love for us that we will know who we really are. When we are aware of the wonderful identity that God has given to us, we are able to say: “I know who I am. I’m a child of God. I’m a member of God’s family. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I can go out and face the world with a completely different attitude. I am secure in who I am. I do not have to be ashamed of who I am. I can continue to stand tall because I have the worth and dignity that comes from knowing that in the eyes of Jesus Christ, I count … I matter … I am special … special enough that Jesus gave his life for me. And now I have something significant to do for Jesus Christ in this life.” So, first, then: a soldier stands tall; a disciple of Jesus Christ stands tall.

Next, a good soldier is also one who stands firm as long as he or she is commanded to do so, even when things look hopeless. As disciples of Christ, as “Soldiers of the Cross,” do we stand firm, or do we easily buckle under pressure?

What would it do to the cause of any army if in the peak of battle the soldiers turned tail and ran? Obviously, the results would be disastrous and spell certain defeat for that army. A good soldier stands firm. By analogy, when there is no apparent ground for faith, the Christian continues to hope; where there is no apparent ground for hope, the Christian continues to endure. We stand firm in the faith God has given us despite the overwhelming odds against us. This firm faith is like a solid rock that nothing can move or alter. Jesus recognized this quality of faith in Simon, whom he called “Peter” or “petrus,” which means “rock.” And Jesus told Peter that it would be on this rock – on this firm and steadfast faith that Peter had – that the church of Jesus Christ would be built.

There is an old and very telling story of a world famous pianist who was on a concert tour of America. At that time the only means of crossing from Europe to America was by ship. The pianist insisted on having a piano installed in his cabin so that he might do his daily six-hour practice. “Surely,” asked a friend, “you can afford to take a few days off to enjoy the crossing? A week or so would not affect your playing.” The pianist replied, “If I stopped practicing for one day, I would notice the difference. If I stopped for a week, the public would notice the
Standing firm in our faith in Christ is a matter of personal discipline and spiritual maturity. As disciples of Christ, our witness is to practice our values in our daily lives in a consistent way. This is how we build strong families and churches that like a Christian army will march into the battle zones of life unflinching, unrelenting, unmoved by any hazards and destructive influences in our world.

As disciples of Christ, do we stand tall, stand firm, and thirdly, as good soldiers, do we stand together with others who undergo the same training and discipline? Here I remind you that no army can so much as march if composed of individual stragglers, each for himself or herself. Nor will any army achieve victories without the help of a powerful bond of unity.

The pages of Christian history books reveal many opportunities in the past for disciples of Jesus Christ to stand together like an army. We will have many more in the future. We may make our individual responses to Jesus as Lord of our lives, but such responses unite us, willy-nilly, not only to Christ but also to one another. Believe it or not, the arena for this togetherness, this sense of community is not primarily the church but the family supported by the church. There can be no more urgent, more assignment for us as disciples of Christ than to close ranks in our families and in the church, to band together as soldiers of the Cross, and to march forward into the future to the drumbeat of Christ’s love.

Stand tall. Stand firm. Stand together. As our children, youth, and young adults return to school and college this week, let’s make a fresh start …let’s “put on the whole armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, we may be able to stand our ground, and after we have done everything, to stand” …and with that I would add, to stand before the presence of God with rejoicing and to hear God say, “Well done, good and faithful soldier! You have fought a good fight! Enter into the joy of my Kingdom!”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.