

DATE: August 24, 2003
SUNDAY: Ordinary 21
SERMON: Confronting the Powers
TEXTS: Ephesians 6:10-20; Mark 6:6-13
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Last week's car bombing in Jerusalem by Palestinian extremists provoked the usual "eye for an eye" response of a missile strike by Israeli forces that killed a Hamas leader, and probably pounded another nail in the coffin lid of the so-called peace process. Like other seemingly endless conflicts, that one seems to have a life of its own, with an thirst for blood that appears insatiable. People on both sides who sincerely desire peace can't seem to make a dent in it; and regardless of the amount of resolve on the part of politicians and governments, like the EverReady Bunny, it just keeps going and going.

What is it about evil that it has this larger-than-life dimension to it; where it is much more than the sum of the individual evil decisions of the people involved? Even when key players on both sides are willing to change their approach and try to do something constructive, they appear powerless to control the events; instead, the events control them.

We sometimes refer to this larger-than-life dimension of evil as systemic evil or structural evil. It's what the writer of the epistle to the Ephesians is talking about in our lesson for this morning, when he says that *our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*[@]

Some of the language in this passage may be strange to us, based as it is on a cosmology that few people in the modern world other than the most woodenly-literalistic fundamentalists could espouse, but the reality it describes is something that people everywhere, and at all times, confront—the reality of power that is greater than the sum of the individual decisions, acts, or persons who wield it, and which, if wielded wrongly, becomes demonic.

Walter Wink, a biblical scholar who has done a great deal of work on the language of power in the New Testament, describes this reality this way:

... the principalities and powers" are the inner and outer aspects of any given manifestation of power. As the inner aspect, they are the spirituality of institutions, the "within" of corporate structures and systems, the inner essence of outer organizations of power. As the outer aspect they are the political systems, appointed officials, the "Achilles' heel" of an organization, laws—in short, all the tangible manifestations which power takes. Every Power tends to have a visible pole, an outer form—be it a church, a nation, or an economy—and an invisible pole, an inner spirit or driving force that animates, legitimates, and regulates its physical manifestation in the world. . . . When a particular Power becomes idolatrous, places itself above God's purposes for the good of the whole, then that Power becomes demonic.^{@ⁱ}

All human institutions, be they governments or corporations or churches or social clubs or political parties have this dual aspect of inner and outer reality. And it is the inner aspect, the spirituality of the institution where we find the battle joined between good and evil, between God and Satan.

Let's see if we can unpack Wink's analysis a bit, for it is a very helpful insight that enables us to reflect upon, and make decisions about, how to live in this world as God's faithful people.

When the civil war in Sierra Leone finally exhausted itself and sputtered to an end two years ago, CNN ran a documentary film produced by a journalist from Sierra Leone, who managed to survive by pretending to be a supporter of the rebel faction. He wished to show the world exactly what was happening in his country, and particularly the impact on the lives of the children who had been forcibly abducted, impressed into the guerilla armies, and forced to commit atrocities. It was a horrifying film to watch, and it demonstrated this larger dimension of the evil in which people get caught up. No

single personal decision or even the sum of personal decisions by those child butchers or their murderous adult teachers can adequately account for the horror. Something larger was at work. The greed of the political rulers and their collusion with the companies that own the diamond mines, the legitimate needs of world industry for those diamonds, the desire of people wealthy enough to afford them to display those glittering gems on their ears and throats and fingers, the desire for rising stock values on the part of shareholders of the companies that produce or use those diamonds— all these things are part of the equation that puts a machete in the hands of a ten year-old and orders him to hack off the hands of a mother and her child in a rural village. All these things and the individual decisions at every level, some of them seemingly harmless, in and of themselves, when taken together call into existence something that develops a life of its own and which begins to devour even those who think they are in control. And that reality which now exists independently of individual human decisions is what we mean when we speak about systemic evil, or to use biblical language, the demonic.

We frequently fail to discern or we close our eyes to this systemic or suprapersonal dimension of evil and the ways we are caught up in it. And even if we do discern it, we feel completely helpless in the face of institutionalized or structural evil. We feel that it's something beyond our control. We're just ordinary people, trying to make a living and provide for ourselves and our family a decent life and a secure future like everybody else; what's wrong with that? What can we do in the face of powerful and anonymous entities like Big Business or the Market or Government?

So what is to be done? How can we live faithfully in a world where the "Principalities and powers" are so frequently bent on a course of opposition to God, and are cosmic in scope and dimension? To fight the inner spiritual powers of evil that are expressed in outward form in institutions and unjust laws and corrupt company ethics and national propaganda campaigns, we

have to use spiritual weapons. Or as Walter Wink puts it, "The church's task is to unmask this idolatry and recall the Powers to their created purposes in the world— >so that (and here he's quoting Ephesians 3:10) *the Principalities and Powers should learn, through the Church, how comprehensive God's wisdom really is.*"

Therefore, put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand your ground, 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 gospel of peace. With all 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.

The description of our weapons in this cosmic spiritual warfare is simply a description of the usual battle armor of the Roman soldier of the first century. The curious thing is that, apart from the sword of the spirit, every piece of spiritual armor mentioned here is for defense rather than offense. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of readiness to proclaim the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation. All these things equip us, he says *to stand fast in the evil day* and to *quench all the flaming darts of the evil one.* The only offensive weapon in the group is the sword of the spirit, which he says is *the word of God.* This is not, as we often mistakenly think, a reference to the Bible, since the Bible as we know it, did not yet exist when this epistle was written. In context, *the word of God* can only mean the word of the gospel message that the church is given to proclaim, the message about God's power of redemptive love revealed in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus, about God's demand for justice in human relationships. It is the proclamation to the Powers of evil, that there is a Power greater than all other powers, the power of divine love, the power that creates and redeems,

the power that makes human life truly humane rather than bestial and cruel, a rising Power whose day has already dawned, and whose consummation will surely come in due time.

But we cannot adequately proclaim that message unless we can first defend ourselves against these larger-than-life powers of evil, this demonic tendency of evil to become independent of those who intend it or who act on those intentions. How do we go about putting on these cosmic weapons of the spirit in order to carry the battle against the institutionalized evil, the supra-personal dimensions of evil that confront us?

Our author's answer is clear. *Pray in the Spirit at all times, in every prayer and supplication. To this end keep alert and always persevere in praying for all the saints.* Or, if I may paraphrase it, he says that the way to arm oneself in this spiritual armor is first of all to pray, second, to pray unceasingly, and finally, to pray in community with others of like faith.

The French legal scholar and lay theologian, Jacques Ellul refers to prayer as Acombat.@ It is first of all, combat with God, where we demand that God act in the situation and not be silent. It is also combat with ourselves, where we do battle with those things within us, those accommodations we make to the spirit of the age, our complicity in the systemic evils that weaken us and hinder us from being effective combatants in the struggle against evil. Prayer is how we discern the inner, animating spirit, the institutional form, if you will, of the evil that confronts us. It is in prayer that we learn to see things as God sees them, and that will teach us how to live in light of what we have seen. To pray is to make a decision about who wields the Ultimate Power in the universe, and to begin to align ourselves with that power. To pray unceasingly means that we adopt this mode of living as our habitual mode. Prayer is not something we do on an occasional basis, but a habit of the heart which is formed within us by habitual practice.

But the prayer of which our writer speaks is not simply the prayer of individual Christians, though that is essential of course. It is primarily

the prayer of the community. No individual soldier, regardless of how effectively equipped, or how well armed, can overcome the enemy. Successful combat demands effective group maneuvers. The Roman armor and weapons were designed to be used in the famous ARoman Wedge,@ with each man protecting himself and nearest companion in the formation as they went on the attack. So praying together, as the Body of Christ, is the primary way we equip ourselves to carry the offensive to the enemy=s stronghold. This is, in fact, the work that the Church is called to in this world– to enter into the spiritual struggle with the evil systems, the “principalities and powers.”

Every December, during the week between Christmas and New Year's, there is an event that takes place in a different large European city that probably doesn't make many of the headlines around the world, but which, from a different perspective, may be of more far-reaching significance than those events– wars, floods, car bombings, or traffic accidents– that do occupy so much airtime in the media.

Last December it happened to be Paris's turn to host this event. It was a prayer meeting– a prayer meeting for more than 80,000 young people ranging in age from 18-30. Sponsored by the ecumenical monastic community at Taizé in southern France, this annual, and little-noticed event (little noticed outside the city where it's being held, that is) is not only an incredible feat of organization, but an event of incredible spiritual power as well.

All the churches in Paris were contacted to do their part in housing and feeding these hordes of young people who would be coming to the “city of lights” from all over Europe and even beyond, during one of the bleakest and darkest times of the year to spend most of every day praying. At the American Church, we accommodated about 150 in our gymnasium and fellowship hall, many of them from Poland or Romania, though there were also some from Finland, Latvia, Austria, and Bosnia as well.

The churches where the young people were housed were also the venues for small group

Bible studies at various times through the week, but three times a day, all 80,000 of those young people made their way by public transportation to four huge exhibition halls on the outskirts of town, each capable of accommodating 20,000 people, and in each of which identical prayer services were being held. There, they would spend a couple of hours together in song, scripture reading and contemplative prayer, affirming their oneness in Christ and their oneness with each other.

Watching and being part of that experience I became convinced once again that the powers of evil whose effects we see leaping out at us in our morning headlines or blaring from CNN or our local news stations on TV are not the only powers at work in our world, despite the way it appears at times. In fact, I have a sneaking suspicion that the power represented by 80,000 praying young people and the power represented by faithful groups of people who gather week after week in lovely sanctuaries like this one, or in mud-brick, thatched roof sanctuaries in the Kenyan bush just may be what's preserving our world from destruction.

That's why, despite the daily media barrage of troubles and tragedies that beset our world, and the recognition of my own complicity in the "evils we deplore," I am not quite ready to give in to despair. Perhaps 80,000 young people coming together for a week, not to lose themselves in the mass ecstasy of a rock concert but to pray, for themselves and the rest of the world, can teach us something about the power there is in coming together to be a community of prayer and action, a power that is, in the words of St. Paul, *Anot merely human, but mighty through God for the pulling down of strongholds.*[@] If we do this work faithfully, praying and fighting with hope and with courage, armed with the weapons of truth and the proclamation of the gospel of peace, we will discover that we are participating in the victory of the Crucified Lamb, who, by his cross and resurrection, has already ensured the ultimate defeat of the evil powers of this world.

i. Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, p. 5ff.