

## **Who is the Enemy?**

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Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 16)

Ephesians 6:10-20

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Longmeadow, MA

August 27, 2006

I'm not sure what your feeling was in hearing today's reading from Ephesians, but for me it is disquieting. In a world torn apart daily by war, the idea of Christians doing battle makes me extremely uneasy. History has show that when religion and weaponry join forces it is often with terrible consequences for all involved. It isn't by accident that the song "Onward Christian Soldiers" has fallen out of fashion in many churches. The weight of history seems too heavy to bear such a message. Whether or not we use the term devil, or Satan as part of our working vocabulary, who among us would argue that evil exists? That the devastation humanity has wrought upon itself could be described as anything less than evil? Some acts and events go so far beyond being simply morally and ethically wrong, beyond being sinful, that evil seems to be the only word which fits. Evil is among the strongest of words in the Christian vocabulary because for me, it is reserved for only those situations where there is no possibility of redemption, when there is nothing even God can do to make them turn out good in the end.

Today's reading from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ephesians names quite clearly the place where evil resides. "For our struggle is not against the 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" (Eph. 6:12). As much as we might want to, we must refrain from removing evil from its cosmic realm and placing it in individuals we don't like, or people whose actions we deplore. The central message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as I understand it, is that no person regardless of what they have done, is out of the reach of God's redeeming love made know to Christians in person of Jesus Christ. So if people aren't evil, sinful yes, broken yes, often mistaken and misguided yes, but never evil, never completely beyond any hope of redemption no matter how unlikely that may seem to us, who is the enemy described in today's reading? Against whom or against what should we be prepared to do battle and to put on the whole armor of God?

For the people of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Ephesus, the image of armor would have been a familiar one. Under the rule of Roman authorities, first century Christians throughout the Mediterranean would have been well acquainted with the Pax Romana or Roman Peace, a “peace” created military force so strong and oppression so complete, that few would dare oppose. When uprisings did occur, they were put down with swift and severe repression, one of which resulted in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. To resist the empire meant to risk imprisonment and quite possibly death. So it is not surprising that the author of Ephesians turns to military imagery to bolster the confidence of the people as military imagery had both deep biblical roots (especially Isaiah)<sup>1</sup> as well as contemporary cultural relevance. In that environment, it is not surprising that all of Jesus' talk about the Kingdom of God, or more literally the Empire of God, ultimately resulted in Jesus crucifixion at the hands of Roman authorities. In that moment, we recall Jesus plea that God would forgive them for they did not know what they were doing. (Luke 23:34) It is also not surprising that his vision of peace struck a cord with 1<sup>st</sup> Century citizens, Jew or gentile, and perhaps not surprising it strikes a cord with us today. Like our ancient ancestors, we too know that peace is not simply the absence of war. We need look no further than the fragile cease-fire in Southern Lebanon or the situation between North and South Korea to know that neither of those places knows peace, even if they are not actively engaged in war-making. As Christians living today we too are called to recognize that our enemies are not of flesh and blood, but are of those larger entities and authorities which permit and perpetuate evil. Having recognized them and named them as such, we must also stand firmly against them.

Evil does exist and we don't have to travel halfway around the world to find it. Evil is at work in any activities which seek to deny and destroy the divine spirit breathed into humanity, those systems, actions and agencies which ignore that each and every person is created in God's own image and is a beloved child of God, those aspects of our common life which seek to make people into objects, commodities and means to a profitable end. Racism, sexism, homophobia, and various other forms of oppression, exist, are irredeemable and are evil. For Christians our hope is placed in the fact that ultimately it will be God, and not humanity, who will conquer the forces of evil. In the mean time, the best that we can do is stand firmly against them.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Volume 11. (Abingdon Press, Nashville TN, 2000). Pp 459.

While the issues can seem so large and we so small, this section of Ephesians makes clear how we are able to stand against evil. First we are called to be strong Lord, or more accurately translated, be engaged in the process of becoming strong in the Lord.<sup>2</sup> The English translation lacks the dynamism of the Greek, finding strength in the Lord is an ongoing process. It is only with this firm grounding in God's strength will we have the strength to stand against evil. And then we are told to put on the whole armor of God:

"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 [there's that dynamism again] what ever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With these take the shield of faith . . . Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:14-17).

Truth, righteousness, proclamation of the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God these are what God has provided to stand against evil.

--When we fasten the belt of truth, we are able name the realities of this present darkness for what they are.

Racism, sexism, homophobia, and various other forms of oppression are not matters of political opinion, they seek to defeat the divine spirit within us and are evil. As Christians we cannot be shy about naming them as such.

--When we do so not because it furthers our own positions but because the gospel demands it, we put on the breastplate of righteousness.

-- When we name evil for what it is, there will be those that throw nasty arrows at us. But God has given us a shield and helmet which protect us. These are our faith and assurance of that we do indeed belong to God first and foremost and nothing anyone says or does can change that.

--Similarly, we take up the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God, something much deeper and broader than merely the words written in the bible, but a covenant written on our hearts.

--And finally, we put upon our feet whatever will make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. It is this peace, this deep and abiding sense of shalom or salaam, which is much bigger than cease fires and treaties, but

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<sup>2</sup> *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV Year B.* Brueggemann et al editors. (Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 1993) Pp. 479.

instead is geared towards the righting of relationships between all God's people, that we all might share in the amazing and wonderful bounty which God has provided. Betty Williams Perkins, winner of the 1977 Nobel Peace Prize for her work in Northern Ireland said, "Without peace there is no justice, without justice there is no peace."<sup>3</sup> Paul reminds us that it is going to be a long road, so put on whatever shoes will make you ready for that long walk. It is a long road we have to walk, and we may not see the end of it ourselves, but like Paul says at the end of this passage "Pray that I may declare it boldly as I must speak." Silence in the face of evil is not an option for Christians.

Which brings me to the final point. This passage ends with the need for prayer. We are called to pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication, to pray for the saints which have walked this road before us, and for those who are ambassadors of the gospel of peace, many of whom are in fact, currently in chains.

As Christians we are confident in the power of God to transform because we have known transformation ourselves through the living Christ. There is both a practical and theological component to standing against evil. Practically there is something, even if it is something small, there is something each one of us can do to name and stand against evil. Theologically, we know that our strength to do so, comes from God, and we believe that God does and will eventually conquer evil, just as God conquered death, aimlessness, and sin. Until then, we must put on God's armor and stand firm and pray. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Preaching the New Common Lectionary: Yr B After Pentecost. Craddock, Fred B. et. al. (Abingdon Press: Nashville TN, 1985) Pp 154.