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First Church of Christ UCC in Longmeadow
Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 2, 2008

John 9.1-41
Ephesians 5.8-14

Exposing Darkness

“Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.”
—Ephesians 5.11

“Will you encourage this child to renounce the powers of evil and to receive the freedom of new life in Christ?” Those are familiar words. We speak them many times each year in our church—as part of the baptismal liturgy. “Will you encourage this child to renounce the powers of evil and to receive the freedom of new life in Christ?”

Rarely when we hear such words do we stop to think about what they mean. What is evil? And what does it mean to *resist* evil? Some people—some religions, in fact—question the very existence of evil. But as good Congregationalists in the Calvinist tradition, and as citizens of a violent and war-torn world, we are not likely to doubt the fact of evil. Someone has said that sin is the one Christian doctrine that is provable—simply by reading the newspaper.

But resisting evil is not a common thought for us. Avoiding evil. Protecting ourselves from evil. Preventing evil. These objectives are more commonplace. Our approach to evil tends to be a *passive* and *reactive* approach. But our baptismal vows—echoing the words of the New Testament—suggest something different.

Today’s words from Ephesians are *active* words. They present a Christian ideal that is fully engaged with the harsh realities of human history and experience:

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the

unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them...everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” (Ephesians 5.8-14)

This passage is a call to act, not to hide, in the face of evil. We must *expose* the world’s darkness, not merely avoid it.

Back when Sue and I were newlyweds and struggling graduate school students we lived in a rather shabby apartment in New Haven. One of the charming features of our apartment building was an infestation of cockroaches. Our slumlords...um, I mean Yale University...would try to control them, but they kept returning.

We seldom saw them in the daytime, but they were the masters of our night kitchen. If we hunted them in the daylight, we could eliminate one or two at a time. So we developed a strategy of setting our alarm clock for 2:00 am. I kept a can of Raid by the bed. When the alarm went off, I would get up and creep quietly—in the dark—to the kitchen. Then I would flip on the light and attack. They would be everywhere. Hundreds of them, scurrying to retreat into the dark crevices of our 1950’s vintage sink and countertop.

According to Ephesians, evil is like a cockroach. It hates the light and thrives on the darkness. Evil’s work progresses most effectively when it is given free reign over the night. Unless we flip on the light and expose it, it will never be hampered in its grim machinations. “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them...everything exposed by the light becomes visible...”

The metaphor of spiritual darkness is used often in the New Testament. It tends to refer to sin, ignorance, and lack of responsible relationships. But it is especially broad in the letter to the Ephesians. The implications of evil are seen as truly cosmic in force. Later in the letter, we read: “For our struggle is not against 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.”¹

As Christians, we are called to flip on the light and expose darkness and evil wherever we find it. Reinhold Niebuhr, a great American theologian of the mid-twentieth century, made powerful use of this imagery. He saw in the New Testament a message that supported courageous and just intervention in the affairs of the world. He argued that Christians need to be realistic and proactive in exposing and resisting evil in human history. In a famous book entitled *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, he wrote:

The preservation of a democratic civilization requires the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove. The children of light must be armed with the wisdom of the children of darkness but remain free from their malice.²

Niebuhr’s theological style has tremendous appeal and currency in our present historical situation. But my reading of the New Testament suggests that Niebuhr moves too quickly to the world arena and neglects the life of the Christian community—the Church.

“It is life within the baptized community that needs attention. Members are to be responsible for one another by rooting out unfruitful works of darkness since each person is part of the household of God. The focus of the entire letter is the present life of the community. There is no sense of witness or mission to those who do not believe.”³

Someone has called the Christian church a community of “fictive kinship.”⁴ It is, perhaps, a term that only scholars could love. But I like it. Something “fictive” is something that is created by imagination. An imaginative reading of Ephesians helps us to see ourselves as the family of God. We have “fictive kinship” with one another. And, so, we are responsible to each other.

We hold each other accountable and we seek to expose the darkness in our midst. Because, you see, we aren’t just the guy at the light switch. We are also the cockroach. Evil is not just around us. It is in us. One of the truly wonderful gifts of Christianity is the gift of a

community that helps us to expose our own darkness to the clarifying power of Christ's light.

When we struggle with evil, we do not need to struggle alone. God has given us a new family—the household of faith—to help us to resist and expose the evil that seeks to control our lives. Working together—using the gift of Christ's love and power—we can flip the switch...and send evil scurrying.

Notes:

¹ Ephesians 6.12. This textual analysis is borrowed from Mary Margaret Pazdan, in *The Lectionary Commentary—The Second Readings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), page 334.

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944, 1960), pages 40-41.

³ Mary Margaret Pazdan, *ibid*, page 335.

⁴ *Ibid*, page 336.