

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16) – Year B – August 23, 2009
1 Kings 8: [1, 6, 10-11] 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69
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In his book, *The Powers that Be*, Walter Wink shares a disturbing story. In 1982, he and his wife headed to Chile to observe first hand the dictatorship of General Pinochet. Moving on to South and Central America, they had the opportunity to talk with priests and nuns about their struggle for human rights and political freedom. Wink says, “We spoke with a lawyer who represented the families of people who had been ‘disappeared,’ We spent an excruciating evening in dialogue with a woman who had been tortured.... Instead of expressing the pain of so much evil in tears,... I wanted simply to escape the pain. I became angry with the oppressors, angry with the oppressed.... The evils we encountered were so monstrous, so massively supported by our own government, ... so anchored in a long history of tyranny that it seemed nothing could make a difference.” Wink had learned a startling fact about the power of the world’s structures. “Unjust systems perpetuate themselves by means of institutionalized violence.... How then can we overcome evil without doing evil – and becoming evil ourselves?”

The portion of the letter to the Ephesians is a unique commentary on understanding different powers, and how you and I are not only called, but also equipped to “stand against the wiles of the devil”. Does talk of the devil sound archaic and ridiculous in this day and age? Maybe. Yet I am certain that there are many whose lives have, as Wink’s, been touched by evil powers of one sort or another. Our only mistake would be to underestimate both what we can and cannot see. If we but scratch the surface, the evils of systemic injustice and oppression are evident: racism, corrupt legislation bought by money and favors, totalitarianism, the terrible violence of the thriving sex trade, slavery and human smuggling. What about the evils of addiction or abuse that destroy the dignity of individuals, break up families, and devastate relationships? Think about how we spend and invest our money. Does it always reflect a desire to serve God in all things? You already know, I already know, the powers at work in our lives. We may not have named them all, but I bet we could. Anyone who has read C.S. Lewis’ book, *The Screwtape Letters*, knows that just as much as God is working in and through us in specific ways, so too are the evil powers trying all means to destroy what God is doing. Opportunity and opportunism are always knocking. There is no neutral ground – the choices we make will either promote God’s work or hinder it.

It is disconcerting to know that we contribute to global systems that are not always working for the greater good. And yet the power of evil can also enter our lives in other ways, both seen and unseen. Inner thoughts and temptations spring into life when we fail to guard our thoughts from the evil one or to bridle our tongues. A few careless words can cause a lot of pain. Evil may be like a little twist of the truth that creates a tiny crack in the foundation of our faith, or creates a wedge of discontent about something, or someone in our lives. Or as Paul has already reminded the Ephesians, when we give safe harbor to festering anger, bitterness, or jealousy it can quickly fuel discord and chaos within and without. The bottom line is that as believers we are redeemed. We are clothed in righteousness, and marked as Christ’s own forever, but we are also sinners in the process of sanctification. We continue to need God’s grace to know and confess our sins, to repent and turn our lives around. Paul’s words expose the absolute inadequacy of our own ability to defend ourselves against the powers of evil at large in the world, or to challenge the hold of evil in the marketplace of life. Jesus has conquered the world, but the final consummation of Jesus’ victory is not yet fully realized. Only God knows the day and time of Jesus’ return, and so in the meantime we can use all the help we can get!

In last week’s passage from Ephesians, Paul warned us not to be foolish, but to discern the will of God. A fool would be like the Emperor in the classic children’s tale of *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. Too proud to admit that we are naked, because we want to believe that our own power can protect us from evil, in whatever form that power takes: money, gender, social status, political affiliation, nationality – you name it. That kind of pride amounts to a reckless and dangerous overconfidence in self. I propose nothing in the sight of God. Not one of us does. On the other hand, a prudent servant of the

Lord will take Paul's advice, and put on the whole armor of God. As Paul's letter assures us, we are not left helpless, defenseless or alone in the face of evil. We may always draw on the strength of God's power in all circumstances. There is nothing in heaven or earth that is more powerful than God.

Paul's imagery is familiar to his audience – a Roman soldier ready for battle. The soldier's belt held his body in good posture for the fight, and most importantly held the scabbard for his sword, as well as holding the breastplate in place. The breastplate and helmet cover the vital organs. A Roman shield was like a large wooden door, covered in leather and soaked in water before battle to quench, literally, the flaming arrows of the enemy. His thick leather sandals were studded with metal for a firm grip, and to protect against sharp objects that might pierce the foot. A favorite booby-trap of ancient days were sharpened sticks buried in the ground to disable the Roman forces that relied primarily on their infantry. What a contrast to the full armor of God. You and I are to clothe ourselves in preparation for battle with the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and with whatever will make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. We are shielded when we accept the gift of faith. Our helmet is the gift of salvation, and our weapon, is "the sword of the Spirit, that is the Word of God". What! No alarm systems, no guns or knives, no stones, pepper spray or even a handy baseball bat? What kind of protection is this? Wait. Our armory is still incomplete. There is one more thing that God requires, and that is prayer. "Is that it?" we may be tempted to ask.

The difference between worldly warfare and defensive measures, and God's power and protection is pretty shocking isn't it? And we cannot miss two vital aspects of God's message here. The first is that we are protected from evil when we take up, that is, participate in, God's essential qualities of truth and righteousness. To be fluent in the truth means to become more and more fluent in the Word of God. Yet another good reason to be a part of our bible study group! To be righteous is to be in right relationship with God. Prayer and worship are essential tools that help me, you, and all Christians to grow in righteousness, and to discern God's will. We are also saved from death and have the hope of eternal life when we accept the gift of salvation, through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. We are not passive observers in this battle. Our resistance is to be non-violent, but it is not passive. Christians fight back against evil by doing the work of an evangelist. Did I just say the dreaded "e" word? If proclaiming the gospel of peace sounds too hard, then consider this. Evangelism is as simple as living authentically in our faith, never hesitating to share how blessed we are in Christ Jesus, and caring enough to invite others to find God's love for themselves. The only real battle is that between the Body of Christ, and the powers that be, where you and I strive for justice and peace by transforming and challenging current systems of power, and growing into the fruit of the Spirit that is God's peace within.

The second vital aspect is exactly that – God's peace. History is a real eye-opener here. Remember what happened to Rome? Every ruler, empire, regime or nation that has forgotten its Godly vocation, which is always to do God's will, eventually falls. There is no power except from God, and God desires peace. The gospel is a message of hope, love and peace. It is about the end of struggle and strife. The gospel proclaims that true freedom is only found in Christ. The kingdom of God is a peaceable kingdom. Pray that we may all, like Paul, declare the gospel boldly in word and deed. Drawing on the power of God, we can overcome evil. Being strong in the Lord and the strength of His power, you and I can truly make a difference.

Amen.