

Spiritual Warfare

Proper 16, Year B, RCL, Track 2. Ephesians 6:10-20. The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost. August 26, 2018. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance, in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

One of the hardest things for Christians to deal with in our modern world is the notion that God is actively opposed by evil. That is, when bad things happen it is not just random chance or human crankiness but also involves a sort of campaign against the good, the true and the beautiful waged deliberately by an active force that wants to have its way, whatever damage that may do.

Now, I admit that I, for one (and there are thousands of others) feel more comfortable in a world where I don't feel the need to look for devils, demons, or whatever name you want to give to elements of metaphysical danger, in every circumstance, large or small. I'm content to believe there really is no monster under the bed.

But the reason I think this way is not that I don't believe elements of metaphysical danger exist but because I don't think they have anything like the staying power and influence of God. This intellectual position (and the resulting practical habit of mind) is based both on study of Holy Scripture and

on study of the natural world. We don't have to impute every instance illness directly to diabolical activity—not that there isn't something diabolical about it. Nor do we have to impute every instance of bad moral choice to demon possession—not that such choices don't demonstrate the activity of evil.

But, as Christians, we do have to take seriously the unmistakable witness of the Bible to the activity of “the cosmic powers of the present darkness,” as St. Paul calls them (among other things) in today's reading from Ephesians. I've selected this quotation because it emphasizes that the problem is cosmic—it affects all creation, however many universes there are (to quote my sermon from last Sunday), and because it emphasizes that the darkness, that is, the time when these corrupt cosmic powers are active and influential, is limited in scope. Paul calls it the *present* darkness because the time is coming when that darkness will be lifted.

The lifting of the cosmic darkness—the end of the time of the active influence of evil—has already begun. This is, if you will, the universal significance of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul's way of talking about this suggests that evil, seeing its inevitable defeat manifest in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, is engaged in a desperate counterattack, so that Christians can expect extra trouble from evil even though God is in the process of putting **paid** to it.

This is usually referred to in Christian discourse as spiritual warfare. I've promised for years (usually when this reading from Ephesians comes around) that I'd talk about spiritual warfare from the pulpit. In bits and pieces, I talk about it all the time. It's really not hard to understand. Prayer, study (especially of Scripture) and Godly conversation—the three methods of immersion in Christian practice that I often mention—are the basis for equipping ourselves with what Paul calls “the whole armor of God.” This armor (as listed in today's reading, minus the military imagery) consists of truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation. Our attachment to these spiritual principles must be deeply habitual and actively practiced in order for us to stand effectively against evil's counterattack.

Faith (and its close partners, hope and love) assure us that evil cannot win in the long run. In the short run, we suffer battle damage from a universe that is full of anti-God influences that are desperately counterattacking everything God stands for. They don't seem to stop and think that they would not even exist without the fact that all existence is grounded in God. I've often mused that the foundational mistake of evil, the thing that makes evil proud and selfish, is lack of gratitude to God for existence itself. It's not for nothing that I (and others) consider gratefulness to be the heart of prayer. If the devil ever felt a surge of gratitude and lifted his heart in prayer, the whole conflict would instantly collapse.

So be grateful, brothers and sisters, for the grace of God Almighty, who has made, sustained and saved this creation of which we are part. It's not for nothing that we call our central act of common prayer the Eucharist, because that word in Greek means thanksgiving. Our hearts stand fast together in thankfulness for the body and blood, the life and the love, of our Lord Jesus Christ.