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August 23, 2009

The War at Home

Ephesians 6:10

We Presbyterians don't talk about the devil much. We don't have much to say about demons or Satan or powers and principalities. I don't know how many friends you have of other denominations but I know, for me, when my Baptist or Evangelical or Catholic friends ask me about this strange silence we seem to have about evil, they are not asking because they are impressed. They are asking because they're sure I must be missing something pretty obvious about the world. Perhaps they are right. We live in a world that has terrible troubles—who can deny it? And, whether it is our own life or the life of someone close to us, we know quite well how people's lives can be riddled with difficulty. We are nothing but naïve Pollyannas if we think these things are not so.

We are usually more comfortable using other words for these things, for trials and tribulations, but couldn't we just as easily admit that there is a demon of addiction that attacks some of us? That a person's secret shame is an evil force in their life? That there are principalities at work when our own regret and bitterness keep us from loving anyone or receiving love in return? We can use psychological or emotional terms but, for the level of havoc they can wreak in our lives, we could also call them devilish. We could call them evil. We could call them cosmic forces. And when threatened with these forces, when their wrath is all around, what do we do? Ephesians tells us just what we do:

We strap on our armor. We hold out a shield against the devil's arrows. We stand strong. That's why we're here, right? That's why we're Christians, because we have it all together and we have the strength to face whatever evil befalls us? Right? No! We know we are not Christians who come here to worship because we are so strong. We are Christians who come here to worship because we know we are weak. We know that terrible things happen, in our world and in our lives, that we cannot stand up against. We know there are too many chinks in our armor. That is why this is the most wonderful passage here in Ephesians because the writer does not demand strength from us. He knows we are weak. He calls us to stand in the strength of God. He calls us to rely on God's own armor to cover us, not our own. When he says, "be strong in the Lord," that means: get your strength from God. So we do not come here to show our own strength but to show we know where to go to find the strength required.

Mother Theresa, the nun who began the Sisters of Charity in Calcutta, India, in 1948, is a favorite for sermon writers. I'm sure many of you have heard stories of her life in sermons perhaps illustrating the power of one person to change lives or the grace and humility we have within us to reach out to the most desperate. All of these would be true and appropriate. Here is an illustration you probably wouldn't expect to hear about this woman of God. Soon a new biography comes out about her and it offers much of her private correspondence over the decades. Previews tell us that the letters show a woman who was riddled with doubt and regrets, shame and beaten down faith. It has been shocking to learn that this woman, thought to be saint material even during her lifetime, should be so empty and weak on the inside. Many who have read her letters cannot find any way to marry the two people: the nun who prayed without ceasing and ministered without respite for over 50 years and the weak woman who felt surrounded by darkness.

Many may have trouble understanding this but the writer of Ephesians does not. He would not be surprised that she felt surrounded by darkness and, at the same time, he would not be surprised that she showed tremendous strength and courage in the world. For the secret is really no secret: the strength was not her own. Even the faith was not her own. She could only stand, relying on the strength of her Creator. She only knew truth because she wrapped God's belt of truth around her. She only possessed faith because of the shield God offered. Even the peace she offered, that she so often did not feel herself, was because of the shoes God gave her to wear. There was a war inside of her, as there is for so many of us, and her greatness was not her own. Yet still she stood strong; strong in the Lord.

I think there was something else Mother Theresa knew, the reason she did not share the darkness within her in public or talk much about the evil that surrounded her. I think she knew something that our friends and fellow Christians who speak so often of the devil and his ways; who worry about his power in this world, may have forgotten. She did not speak of the devil or of demons or of cosmic principalities not because she feared them and not because she wanted to deny them, but because she knew how the story would end. She could face the war at home—the one happening in her heart—because she knew that the war out there, the one on the cosmic level in the heavenly spheres, was over and God was the victor.

The writer of Ephesians tells us that the devil's power has already been defeated in Christ's death and resurrection. He writes in chapter 1 that Christ reigns "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...not only in this age but also in the age to come." The writer also reminds us that God has a plan for the world and, through Christ's work, that plan has not been thwarted and will never be thwarted. The plan is that God wins. Satan is already bound, even now. This does not mean evil has no power, no sway. What it means is that evil will not have the victory. That has already been decided. That is why we do not often speak of him or of his ways. Because the war is over and our work is to live into that truth no matter what the war at home in our hearts looks like. Our calling is to live as children of light and not children of a defeated darkness. We are to stand strong in the strength of God, protected by God's Word and God's righteousness and God's faith and truth for, in the Lord, we cannot lose.