

Date: August 27, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 21

SERMON: Standing Orders

Text(s): Ephesians 6:10-18; John 7:1-9

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There was a grandmother who would never say anything negative about anyone. In fact, she always went out of her way to find something positive to say about everyone. People like that are rare, aren't they? Where's the fun in that? It's much more fun to be critical. But this dear woman would have none of it. If she heard someone else being criticized in her presence, she always stepped in to say something good about the person to balance the criticism.

Her family had gotten used to this quirk of hers, and admired her for it, but occasionally found it irritating, the way most of us find too much consistent goodness irritating. One Sunday afternoon, she had the whole family gathered around the table, and at some point, the conversation turned to a discussion of the shortcomings of someone else—maybe they had all just come home from church and were critiquing the pastor's sermon—I don't know, but at any rate, they were having a good time finding fault and describing the the other person's failures in great and humorous detail.

Grandma listened to this as long as she could and then, as was her habit, she broke in and said something positive about the person who was being critically dissected. One of her grandsons said to her with good-humored exasperation, "Honestly Gram, I think you'd find something positive to say about the devil!" With a sly smile she replied, "Well, he certainly is very diligent at his work, isn't he?"

I was reminded of that old joke when I read the text of our epistle lesson for it reminds us of the truth of that grandmother's assessment of the diligence with which the devil's work is done. At first reading, the language of this text appears very strange to modern people like us. Most of us don't go around on a day to day basis

dropping sentences like "*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against thrones, dominions, principalities and powers, cosmic rulers of this present darkness,*" into our everyday conversation. We don't even know what many of those terms mean or meant to the writer, much less use them on any sort of regular basis. So most of the time, if we even read them, we just pass over them quickly as something archaic, and therefore, of little relevance to us.

Yet, they refer to something that confronts every one of us and confounds our best attempts to get our minds around it. And that is that far beyond the evils that are common to our experience—cheating on our income tax, having our house burgled or a car stolen, a sexual assault on someone we know or even the odd murder—there is a dimension of evil that we cannot even begin to comprehend, it is so far beyond our ordinary experience.

Maybe some of you saw the recent rerun of the TV series "Band of Brothers," the saga of Easy Company of the 101st Airborne during World War II. Since we were in France when that series was first aired, I've had to catch up during times when it's been rerun, and I had never seen the last two episodes. The next-to-last episode shows the men of Easy Company on patrol in a forest in Germany, and they suddenly become aware that things are too quiet. Suspecting an ambush, they immediately become very vigilant as they pick their way stealthily through the trees, expecting enemy fire to erupt at any moment. Instead, they emerge from the trees to find in front of them a sight none of them had ever expected to find, and which left them speechless with horror. They had stumbled onto one of the slave labor concentration camps. Their numbness and stupefaction at the sight of the heaps of dead bodies of prisoners the Nazi guards had killed before leaving the camp, and the physical condition of the survivors who were close to starvation was an example of the sort of thing I'm talking about. There are dimensions of evil that are so monstrous that they overwhelm us.

Many of us probably saw the movie *Hotel Rwanda* and were properly horrified, even though the movie spared us the most gruesome scenes of the massacres that happened there. When the western world finally began to try to come to terms with those horrific events, an article appeared in the *International Herald Tribune* entitled *Rwanda: Why Were There So Many Butchers?* It raised the question that all of us ask: How could so many people, most of whom were probably ordinary people like ourselves, suddenly turn into savage killers, or at least into passive bystanders who participated in the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of their neighbors. The article even mentioned that many Hutu men murdered their Tutsi wives. How could that happen? It's inconceivable! Unthinkable! Incredible! But, alas, not impossible. It happened. "Everybody had to participate," one Lutheran minister was quoted as saying. "To prove that you weren't RPF [the Tutsi-dominated rebel group] you had to walk around with a club. Being a pastor was not an excuse. They said, 'You can have religion afterwards.'"

Can you understand that kind of evil? I confess that I cannot. There's something more at work here, something St. Paul described as "the mystery of iniquity."

That's what this strange language about "principalities and powers" and "thrones and dominions" is all about in our lesson today. It's strange, mainly because our cosmology, our mental picture of the universe is so different from that of people in the first century. We no longer live with the mental picture of the universe as a three-story building as they did, with a ground floor where we live, the dome of the sky with the visible planets and stars as the second story, and the penthouse out of sight on the roof where the invisible and unknowable God lived.

It was those folks on the second floor, the planets and stars, who were semi-divine beings they named variously as "world rulers" or

"principalities" or "thrones" or "dominions" or "cosmic powers" who caused all the trouble—wars, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and such.

But even if Galileo taught us a different mental picture of the universe, we can still identify with the truth our writer is struggling with, because we struggle with it too. Despite the horrendous things we know that human beings are capable of doing to themselves and one another, there is a larger spiritual dimension to evil that transcends its outward manifestations. We often call that larger something, the demonic. Whether we personify the demonic into a single evil intelligence that we call the Devil, as older generations did, and some still do, or whether we conceive of it in some other way, we are still confronted by the ovens of Auschwitz, the Gulags of Stalin, the heaps of decaying bodies in the killing fields of Cambodia and Rwanda and Bosnia, the bloody slaughter that goes on daily in Iraq and Palestine, and on and on the list goes. Instinctively, we know that we are up against something that will not be solved merely through individual good intentions, free elections, better housing, better education, or universal health care, necessary and vital as all those things are.

Theologian Walter Wink, has, perhaps more than anyone else, taught us to see that this larger dimension of evil has a way of becoming institutionalized in our economic structures, in our political and social institutions, so that evil takes on a life of its own and becomes self-perpetuating. Demons, according to Wink, are not supernatural beings with horns and hoofs and pitchforks; they are the inner spiritual realities of social and political institutions, and especially of ideologies that become oppressive and malign in their impact on human life. Ideologies are those things that you can attach the suffix "ism" to—fascism, communism, racism, materialism, nationalism, consumerism, etc. Ideologies are idols—false gods, because they pass themselves off as the ultimate reality and demand the total allegiance of their adherents. Any particular

institution has the potential either to be a force for good that makes human life more humane, or the potential for becoming demonic. It may be a force for good at some time, and yet at another time be oppressively evil. Even the church has this double potential, and the history of the church has given us ample evidence of both. The same church that produces a Mother Teresa or a Saint Francis of Assisi or a Martin Luther King, Jr., has also been capable of producing the Spanish Inquisition or the Salem Witch Trials.

That danger that communities and institutions always face is exactly the reason why the author of Ephesians insists that it is the calling of the the Christian community, the church, to enter into spiritual warfare with evil at this cosmic dimension. And he gives some standing orders for how we are to engage in this struggle with evil. Standing orders are general orders; they always remain in force until rescinded. And his instructions are standing orders in that sense. These are the Christian's weapons, and the Christian is engaged in this warfare against the cosmic powers of evil until further notice.

But they are also standing orders in another sense. They are orders given to enable us to stand our ground against these powers of evil, against the monstrosities that beset our world, not only so that we will not be overcome by evil, but so that we can actually join in God's victory over evil and the Power of death to which we claim that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead bears witness. *Therefore, take on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.* He goes on to list the various weapons in the Christian's armory: his metaphor is modeled on the standard ensemble worn by the Roman legionaries of his day—the belt of truth, the breastplate of justice (perhaps today he'd say the Kevlar vest of justice), the gospel of peace for your shoes, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, the word of

God. This sword of the Spirit is the only offensive weapon in the ensemble; the rest are defensive, for protection. This sword or word of God, is not, as we sometimes mistakenly think, a reference to the Bible, since the Bible did not yet exist when this epistle was written. In context, *"the word of God"* can only mean the word of the gospel message that the church is given to proclaim, the message about God's power of redemptive love revealed in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the proclamation to the Powers of evil, that there is a Power greater than all other powers, the power of divine love, the power that creates and redeems, the power that makes human life truly humane rather than bestial and cruel.

But it is his next statement that is the crucial one in this whole passage, for it is the key to the whole thing. It is the means, not only by which we put on this godly armor, but the means by which we enter into the battle, the means by which we stand firm, equipped as we are with the armor of God, and the means by which we hold our position against all the assaults of the cosmic powers of evil. I'm going to translate what he says as literally as I can so that we can get the full impact: *In every prayer and petition, pray in the spirit at every opportunity, and to that end, be on guard with total perseverance and prayer for all the saints.*

If I can paraphrase what he says, I believe he's saying something like, "The way to combat these cosmic powers of evil is first of all, both individually and collectively, to pray; secondly, pray constantly; and finally, pray some more."

Now this is not as simplistic, mystical, and naive a standing order as it might at first appear. Prayer of the sort he's talking about is not the "Now I lay me down to sleep," bedtime prayers we say with our children or the consumer wish lists we often turn into prayers. This kind of prayer is the way we reach beyond ourselves and connect with others at a deep spiritual level. It's the way we protect ourselves against allowing the

cosmic powers of evil to take root in our own hearts. Did you ever notice that you cannot hate or think evil of someone if you're praying for them? It's impossible. And did you ever notice how hard it is to pray for someone you dislike or fear or have a grudge against? Why do you think Jesus commanded us to pray for our enemies? Because they cannot remain enemies if we pray for them. Prayer for others is intrinsically an act of love and reconciliation that produces peace. Prayer is both an acknowledgment of our own deep helplessness as individuals in the face of monstrous and systemic evil, and a bold step to join forces with God's own struggle against the Power of Death. To pray is, in the words of the French Christian, Jacques Ellul, "to enter into combat." Prayer is the standing order which we as individual Christians and collectively, as the Church, are called to obey. Through prayer, both personal and corporate, we stand fast against the cosmic powers of evil.

Does this mean that if we just all get together and pray, horrors like the massacres in Rwanda will never happen again? No. God may have ultimately assured victory over the fallen powers by raising Jesus from the dead, but those powers have not yet laid down their arms. Just as the success of D-Day assured the victory of Allied Forces in World War II, and yet the war went on for another year before Naziism gave its death rattle, so God's victory over the powers, while certain, is not yet fully manifest. When we pray, we enter into the struggle on God's side. We cast our lot with Good, with Justice, with Truth, with trust that this is God's world, after all, and that *"though the wrong seem oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."* In other words, we take sides. And when we take sides, we discover that we actually enter into the experience of God's final victory by faith and hope. We discover that it's possible to live in hope instead of despair. We discover that we do have strength and the courage to stand in the evil day. Our heads and arms may be bloody, but they will be

unbowed. And we look forward, in faith and hope, to that day when, as the old saint, Lady Julian of Norwich said with such certainty, *"all will be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be will well."*