

A Sermon for the Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity, October 12, 2008

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The Epistle today tells us, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers...” (Ephesians 6:10f.). In other words, our real enemies are not who we think they are. This is a central point of the gospels. Why didn’t Jesus battle the Romans head-on? Why didn’t Jesus root out the corrupt leadership in Israel? The answer is that Jesus did not fight against the obvious, visible enemies—against flesh and blood. He fought against the invisible enemy, the evil one.

The real enemy was revealed in the temptation in the wilderness. Jesus conquered the devil by being faithful where all other human beings were not. Hebrews says that Jesus became man and died for us that “through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is the devil” (2:14).

We have many visible battles—flesh and blood adversaries. But there is a bigger enemy lurking behind them—the rulers of the darkness of this world. The invisible enemy uses the visible circumstances of life to undermine our faith.

From the perspective of faith and eternity, the outcome of the visible battle is not important. In fact, the lives of Jesus and the saints are characterized by visible defeat and failure. Jesus was killed tragically and unjustly on Good Friday. The martyrs suffered brutal and untimely deaths.

But these are counted as victories because they remained faithful. This is the key thing. Every visible challenge in life is a test of faith. The question is, Will we remain faithful when it is hard? Are we willing to suffer temporary defeat to win the war of faith?

The devil bribes us with short term rewards to get us to be unfaithful. He doesn’t care about the rewards, he cares about us being unfaithful in order to separate us from God. First Peter says, “The devil roams about as a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

God offers eternal rewards in exchange for obedience. God wants a relationship of love with us, which requires sacrifice; a willingness to love when there is no reward. Jesus gives himself to us as the bread of life to sustain us through times of testing so that we may share his resurrection.

One current outward battle is an economic crisis. As with all such visible battles, we miss the point if we focus too much on the visible thing, the money itself. The question is not, Will we have enough? The question is, what impact will the crisis have on our faith?

One of the great demonic lies of the modern world is the idea that the value of human beings is primarily economic; that a worker is primarily an expense on a financial statement, that one’s personal value is one’s “net worth” on a balance sheet; that our well-being is entirely a function of the Dow Jones average; that business activity is to be assessed only on the basis of whether it makes money.

The Bible says that this is a false valuation. We have value primarily because we are made in God’s image. Our behavior is to be assessed on the basis of whether it reflects that image. As Jesus said, “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.” (Luke 12:15).

Historically, faith has had a paradoxical relationship with economic well-being. Economic well-being tends to diminish faith as people come to trust their money more than God (cf. Deuteronomy 8:11-17). Times of economic crisis are often times of spiritual renewal as people, shaken from their comfort and sense of security, turn to God. In terms of faith, prosperity is a temptation and crisis an opportunity.

The goal of the spiritual life is to be faithful in either circumstance; to use prosperity as an opportunity to be thankful and generous, and to use times of need as an opportunity for greater prayer and faith.

In Philippians, St. Paul summarizes the ideal perspective:

I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (4:11).

The devil attacks our contentedness by trying to get us to live in fear. We can be consumed with worry about what might happen. Or we can regret what we did or failed to do. Regret for the past and fear of the future are two of the devil's tools. They cause us to miss the presence of Christ now.

We combat the spiritual enemy with spiritual weapons; the truth of God's word and prayer. Through the life of prayer we come to know God's forgiveness and God's providence and are set free from guilt and regret. We come to see, as Romans says, how "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

Through the life of prayer, we replace fear with the Christian hope. As Romans says, "Neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-9).

Two stories about money have stuck with me over the years. A man lost all his money in a business venture, but had tithed faithfully on the profits during the entire course of the business. He was asked, "Did you lose everything?" He said, "No, I still have all the money I gave away." Another story is told about the death of a very wealthy man. Someone asked his accountant, "How much money did he leave? The accountant answered, "He left all of it."

St. Paul writes, in 1 Timothy, "We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out." Thus, we pray for daily bread, confident that God will provide for our needs; but we always see the larger war that lies behind the visible battle. We remember that a Day of Judgment is coming when we will be asked, not, how much money did you have? But, did you live a faithful life?

"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world."