

Principalities and Powers

sermon digest

September 26, 2010

Ephesians 6:10-20

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The question of evil in human life comes down to the location of responsibility. Who can explain Adolf Hitler? *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's account of his struggle for power, sold six million copies by 1940. The book was poorly written, a distortion of reality as well as history. Its popularity revealed the world's *Kampf* (struggle) to know Hitler rather than the quality of his work. Obviously, being a bestseller had nothing to do with truth or justice then or now. In his final rantings, Hitler said: "I want the world to know me. . . . The time is not yet ripe. As yet the world cannot understand me. It can only condemn or praise, execrate or flatter. Not understand. But one day, I want them to know." His statement adds to his long list of failures. The world never got to know Hitler or to understand his inhumanity. We can describe the man, but to this day no one has explained the monster within the man.

Ephesians offers an explanation of evil: "our struggle is not against the enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." But we are a people of science. We want natural, physical explanations. The weather forecast indicates a major storm moving into the area. We do not attribute the thunder to a battle of the gods or deify a weather pattern as a personal event. The weather person is called a "meteorologist," a field of science. The forecast is backed up with satellite photographs of atmospheric movements. Invocations to deities or demons to provide information, consultations with a crystal ball, and references to nature signs in the almanac are acceptable only for entertainment purposes.

Assigning evil to outside forces is an escape from human responsibility. Was the Jewish Holocaust the child of Hitler's insanity, or was it the mass insanity of an entire nation? If *insanity* is the appropriate word, is Hitler and Germany innocent by reason of insanity? Had he lived to face trial at Nuremberg I doubt that Hitler would have been exonerated of his crimes, but the appeal to outside causes is universal. We really do not want to believe that any human being, not even Hitler, is the personification of evil. Freudian psychology has provided us with an explanation of behavior not only in terms of mental illness but as the effect of our culture and social context. We know, for example, that increased criminal behavior seems to be directly related to poverty; but we do not excuse robbery because someone needs money. Insanity, however, can be a legal defense in any crime. What about our genes? We are learning that nature is as important as nurture for explaining human behavior, but family characteristics do not excuse crime.

The fact of evil in our world and the evidence of evil in human beings is hardly debatable, but we still have not settled the question of the source. *Insanity* is a legal term tied to the issue of responsibility. Certainly people do not choose mental illness any more than they choose their genes or their culture. Thus, civilized society no longer punishes mentally ill. Ideally, we treat the sick and provide them with a shelter of protection. Why? We judge that they are not responsible for their behavior. The "sick" behavior was caused by forces beyond the person's control, but the line is fuzzy. The level of personal responsibility is still a court decision.

The archaic reference to a "lunatic" was rooted in the myth that the moon, or lunar phases, caused bizarre behavior. In the early pages of the Old Testament, God was the cause of evil in the world. Since the Creator was in complete control of the creation, early Jews could not conceive of anything happening in history beyond the reach of God. Every event was either an act of God or an act allowed by God. The Babylonian Exile exposed the Jews to another explanation. Persian dualism suggested two gods, one totally good, the other totally evil. The sudden appearance of Satan in the Old Testament was an adoption of Persian theology. Evil came from a deity outside of human origins and totally alien to the good God of creation. Demons served a useful purpose placing the cause of evil outside of God and human responsibility.

In the Roman world of early Christians, people commonly believed that life was controlled by demonic powers. The primary task of religion was to provide ways to ward off evil demons and welcome good ones. This was the context in which one finds repeated discussions of demons and acts of exorcism in the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels. Demonic evil was a part of the landscape of his world. Jesus could ignore the demonic about as easily as he could ignore the bivouac of Roman soldiers in the occupied territories of Palestine. Mental illness, epilepsy, muteness, and every other human affliction were attributed to demons; and Jesus lived out his ministry in his world, not ours. He did not challenge the common understanding of the demonic any more than he challenged the shape of the earth or attempted to explain nuclear fusion.

The spiritual dimension of human life is real. People in the twenty-first century continue to accept first century explanations, but most of us have moved on. Four centuries ago, Martin Luther was so certain of the personified reality of the Devil that he was said to have thrown his inkwell at the demon. More recently Comedian Flip Wilson's trademark line, "the Devil made me do it," was always good for a laugh, even if it was a nervous chuckle. Then came movies like "Rosemary's Baby" and "The Exorcist." They played up a popular notion of a demonic superpower—something outside ourselves causing destructive thoughts and actions; but few people took the movies for anything more than fictional

entertainment. I had a friend in seminary who commented to me one day that he did not always believe in God, but he was pretty sure that the Devil was real. My friend had not "seen" Luther's Devil, but he had experienced the reality of evil in the world and reached for the best explanation he knew, the Devil.

Walter Wink *Naming the Powers*, (1984) has taken an interest in the "principalities and powers" of the Bible to the point of obsession. He confessed to his chosen ignorance. He spent years ducking references to spiritual powers in the world that were based on a primitive world view. Like a flat earth, references to demons and spiritual powers had to be reinterpreted or excluded for the modern mind. But Wink had a problem: the powers of evil in this world could not be understood on a merely visible or physical level; the language of the New Testament describing the sources of evil is fluid, referring both to flesh and blood and to spiritual realities at the same time, both an inner and an outer dynamic. Nevertheless, they are real.

The message of Ephesians is especially relevant to a world which is prone to ignore the transcendent and every spiritual cause. Of course we wrestle with flesh and blood, but evil is more than mean people and inhumane institutions. If we assume that we can see and measure every problem in this world, we have chosen to be blind to half of reality. Evil has a soul and must be confronted at its source. If we do not grasp the reality of the inner nature of evil, we cannot begin to deal with the struggle. We keep thinking that we can control the body of evil without reference to its spirit. Capital punishment has been restored because of public frustration, but compared with states that do not have a death penalty, evidences show that execution does not retard murder. Official executions may even be responsible for the justification and increase of murder. If we wrestle only with flesh and blood, it seems that all we need to do with crime is tend to bodies—lock them away or execute them. Like capital punishment, war does not end the evil which causes war.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr observed still another level of evil in human herds, gangs, mobs, and sometimes even nations. The manifestation of evil in groups takes on a different character than that of the sinister individual who acts alone and must bear total responsibility for that action. The legal principle operates in the human genius: no individual member can be held accountable for the actions of the corporation. Corporate evil transcends the individual and takes on a spirit that moves events.

Daniel Day Williams, in *The Demonic and the Divine*, cites the case of a young German woman whose diary was published after the war. Engaged to a storm trooper, she described a youth rally on the banks of the Rhine: "a desire began to burgeon within me, to be permitted to help, like these women and girls in the great work of our leader, Adolf Hitler. A torch had been thrown into my heart and it continued to flame and blaze." She describes the campfire, the marching songs, the offering of the German prayer of thanksgiving, and then Hermann Goering's address and call to battle as she held a torch over his shoulder to illuminate his face. Williams was sobered by her description of an overpowering experience that justified an absolute commitment to the Nazi cause.

A couple of presidents ago, a button worn at a political convention read: "Where is Lee Harvey Oswald when America really needs him?" Yes, Oswald is dead, but the spirit of Oswald's act of violence lives on. We wrestle not just with flesh and blood but with principalities and powers, spiritual forces of evil that cannot be locked up or executed.

In 1995, *The Christian Century* quoted Randall Terry of Operation Rescue: "I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good." But Terry was opposing abortion on the grounds of religion. Does this mean that religion also has the potential for spiritual evil? Absolutely! And who in this generation is not aware that religion can be the most powerful force of evil in this world?

World figures, heroes and anti-heroes, tend to become bigger than life in the social imagination. John Kennedy and Elvis Presley continue to haunt the pages of the grocery market tabloids, but contrary to what we wish or imagine and numerous eye-witness sightings, they are dead. The fear that Hitler was bigger than life led to the speculation that he had escaped, but he was nothing more or less than a man. Hitler is dead, most likely a suicide; but the death of the man did not end the hatred of Jews or the lust for world domination. The gas chambers and ovens of Dachau are cold and silent, but the mentality (or insanity) which created them is not dead. Sometimes we have to stand against the flesh and blood body of evil, but we have not begun to struggle with the darkness of our world until we have faced the prejudice, the sadistic cruelty, the nationalistic zeal which sacrifices the children of God to the altars of whoever can ascend the thrones of power.

Spiritual evil must be met with spiritual good. The whole armor of God in Ephesians is a military metaphor for the spiritual response to evil. Paul does not call for an attack or any act of aggression toward other people. Rather he repeatedly calls for Christians to "stand," to hold their ground against the onslaught of evil in the world. The spiritual arsenal includes truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, salvation, and the word of God.

At the height of the South African crisis, the government cancelled a political rally against apartheid. Desmond Tutu then announced a worship service in St. George's Cathedral. The Church was filled with protesters, and the walls were lined with soldiers and police carrying loaded guns bayonets standing ready to close down the service. Bishop Tutu stood to speak.

He addressed the evils of apartheid, how rulers and authorities had propped up an evil system doomed to fail before the justice of God. Then he pointed his finger at the police and said, "You may be powerful—very powerful—but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost."

Then, in a moment of unbearable tension, the bishop appeared to soften. He came out from behind the pulpit and flashed a big smile as he began to bounce up and down with glee: "Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side." The crowd roared with laughter and began to dance. The guns were overpowered by the spirit of the moment and the police melted away.