

"The Courage to Confront the Powers that Be"

Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20

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There is a castle overlooking the Rock River in northern Illinois. The castle is owned by the Presbyterian Church. It is a retreat center: Stronghold.

Decades ago, The Presbyterians bought it from the Strong family, then owner of The Chicago Tribune.

The castle has a big tower with a open spiral staircase: leads up to a room From which you have a view of the Rock River and surrounding area. The view Outside is beautiful. Then you turn, and from the top, inside: as you look down the center of this open staircase: Painted on the walls is the whole story of Rumpelstiltskin.

Why was this story on a newspaper owner's castle? Rumpelstiltskin: the story of an elf who spins straw into gold. Like a newspaper publisher: take ordinary words, and spin them into gold. Words that form ideas that help to record and shape history.

Words matter. For us as people of faith, they more important than gold. They are the lenses through which we see. They are the web of life upon which we balance, Words are the ground upon which we walk. Words can join us together and build up: A friendship, a family, a city, a nation, a world.

But words can also be dangerous. Words can put us on a greased tightrope, from which it is easy to fall, Words can function to separate us. To keep us apart. Words matter.

I am fascinated by the specific choice of words in this passage of Ephesians.

Words like: "Rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, the present darkness, spiritual forces, the wiles of the devil."

Strange terms, but don't you love it? These words are obviously a critique: a way of thinking critically about the world.

But Rather than focusing on a specific person to criticize, e.g. a specific Caesar. Or e.g. a specific organization, Ephesians suggests something far larger, far more comprehensive is at stake. "Rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, spiritual forces."

Walter Wink: New Testament Scholar, wrote a definitive series of books on "The Powers." He examined these words and ideas in the bible. His umbrella term is "The Powers." Sometimes the Bible talks about the Principalities and Powers for the terms used in Ephesians.

The Powers are about a spiritual force that works through words, ideas that implied moral concepts, social forces in institutions and organizations, along with specific cultures, rituals, practices. When it all comes together, they take on a life of their own.

It has a lot of similarities to what we talk about in the term, "corporate culture." Every organization has its specific corporate culture. Corporate culture shapes the people in the organization through values, practices, rules spoken and unspoken.

One large nationally known business did corrupt and illegal things. It was part of their corporate culture. Finally, the size of its corruption drove it out of business. Some of its former employees were hired by a new similar business.

It was not long after that these former employees began suggesting to their colleagues at this new business, "Hey, we can get this done faster if we cut some corners on this." They were bringing the spirit of the old organization to the new.

Not one person: a whole host of people and practices, symbols and rituals carry forward the spirit of the powers. It takes a person of tremendous spiritual strength to stand up against the prevailing spirit that dominates organizations.

Today we mourn the loss of Senator John McCain. He was tortured for 5 years.

He came back to eventually win a seat in the U.S. Senate. Then the spirit of the age convinced many to justify the use of torture, Senator McCain had the courage to stand up against the use of torture and say, "No."

It is that group spirit that the concept of the Powers is seeking to unveil. It has a destructive power that goes beyond the power of any one individual.

It is fascinating to stop thinking about individuals as the source of our problems, and look at the broader scope: To ask, "What is the source of authority? Cosmic power?" What is the "spiritual force?" that is driving the destructive events in our world?

Walter Wink, for example, examines the Power of "the myth of redemptive violence." The myth is that, if violence is the problem, then the only solution is more violence. In other words, violence is what will save us from violence.

This myth is rooted in fear, retribution. It is often rooted in a piece of technology. As Napoleon said: "The only thing you can't do with a bayonette is sit on it." Violent weaponry seems to cry out that it must be used. That is part of a spiritual force. It is reinforced by political forces seeking power, lobbyists pushing specific ideas, all these ideas and sociology, culture, politics, come together and take on a life of its own. These are all normal parts of life, but, unexamined, they can take on a destructive spirit. A spiritual power.

"The myth of redemptive violence" is made up of a whole web of ideas and social structures that ends up making it seem as if violence is the only rational choice.

It is not real.

Remember the Harrison Ford: movie "Witness." A big city policeman protecting an Amish witness. Young boy not safe from mob in the city.

So they go to hide by living among a nonviolent Amish community. But the mob finds out where they are. The basic idea is: the community is vulnerable, but the closeness of the community ultimately is what protects the innocent.

I apologize: you probably don't remember that movie. It is 30 years old:

Most of you weren't even born yet. It's just, when was the last time you saw a movie where nonviolence was the solution? Count it up: Saved by Violence movies: Jason Bourn, James Bond, Bruce Willis, Arnold, all the zombie movies, Star Wars, not to mention 9 of 10 top video games violent. Video Games like Fort Night where 100 players go in, 1 comes out. These violent games have more viewers than basketball or baseball. Then count up the movies where people are saved by non-violence: can you think of any? We are surrounded by the myth of redemptive violence. We start to think it is real.

That is just one example of the Powers. Whether you call it culture, corporate culture or the principalities and powers, spiritual forces.

You can think about these Spiritual powers having sway over a University. Ohio State wrestling with that this week: the interesting question is not, was the problem that of one or two people, but was it part of a corporate culture? How widespread is it and what were the justifications for inaction?

Rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, the present darkness, spiritual forces
Spiritual forces that go beyond the individual. They can destroy people's lives.

For another example, let me say first, I am grateful for our brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church. I have benefitted so profoundly from so many Catholic scholars, I did some coursework at the Jesuit School of Theology in Chicago,

And found their teaching so profound. And we all ought to stand in profound respect for the Catholic Church's witness to social justice, to care for the poor and disposed, and their global work with immigrants, their work among the poor.

But they have had difficulty in this this weakness in their corporate culture, Regarding their sense of protection of innocent children. This destructive spiritual force has caused devastation in so many lives. It is not about individuals alone. It is a system that needs to be changed. The world needs the public witness of the Catholic Church. It needs reform that the language of the Powers can help to address.

But this is a call for every institution that works with children and youth to take a look at its own practices. Every school, every church, every Scout troop, dance troop, hockey club, Olympic team, college, university, every organization that works with children and youth.

All need to have rock solid practices, such as, for children:

No adult is ever allowed to be in room with a child alone;

Every class room needs windows in the door,

A criminal background check needs to be done annually on every adult leader;

There should be required anti-abuse training for leaders on a regular basis,

If there is a problem, the police are contacted first, not last.

If there is any question of misconduct, the person goes on leave until it is resolved; it is resolved through trained, neutral parties,

And more – there needs to be a solid philosophical, theological understanding of why we work with children, and what our roles and goals are. It needs an in-depth understanding.

“Put on the whole armor of God.” Ephesians says. This is not to protect us from critique.

The context of Ephesians

is taking a look at the Roman troops surrounding them,

It would be so attractive to become like them.

It is tempting to try to protect oneself with violence.

Get yourself a sword and a nice set of armor.

But this book of the Bible is doing some spiritual jujitsu.

Flipping the language on its back.

If you want to be strong: Part of your armor is the truth: Stand up for the truth.

Speak the truth: the truth of the love of Jesus Christ.

You want to be strong: Put on the shoes that will take you out the door to DO SOMETHING (not just think about it) do something in the Spirit of Peace. Don't just be a peace wisher; be a peace maker.

Put on the helmet of salvation: Use your head to think about the world

With the Biblical, theological ideas our faith gives us.

The sword you need is the word of God: the presence of Jesus known in the Bible.

Take the shield of faith: faith is not about vague beliefs. Faith is about a way of living and acting that does not leave you afraid, but courageous.

The spirit of every age tempts us to think of evil as some sort of superpower.

It is not. “Evil is a kind of weakness.” (Edward Farley, p. 144). Evil can't abide the tragic vulnerability of life.

Life is vulnerable. When we refuse to see this,

we end up trying to protect ourselves until we wall out life itself. The Old Testament talks about idolatry. The New Testament talks about the Powers. Both witness to our temptation toward securing ourselves against life's challenges to the point of strangling ourselves. Evil is a kind of weakness.

Faith is about courage. Existential courage. The word courage comes from the Latin word cor: heart. You have to have the strength of heart, the courage of inner faith to embrace life in all its vulnerability.

Faith finds strength in opening ourselves to God, and thus opening ourselves to one another. Faith gives us the courage to live: to open ourselves to life, to true being.

Jill Winter and I met with some members of Unity Church next door. There was a shooting in the alley during a funeral there a few weeks ago. Yesterday, members of the church and community came together and we talked. We talked about what exactly had happened.

To sum up a nearly two hour conversation, simply put: if we started with the core question: do we need to be more afraid?, we ended up with a core answer: What we really need is more community. As one man said he lived with a sense of freedom because, "I refuse to let fear determine my life." That's a spirit of faith!

We need the courage to confront the Powers that be. The Bible, the community of the church, our faith tradition, prayer, hymns, all the stuff of faith helps to strengthen us. And then we turn the Powers on their heads, and live with a sense of ultimate trust. Christians live this way, and inspire one another. I love the Mexican proverb:

"They tried to bury us.
They did not know
That we were seeds."

It shows the spiritual jujitsu of faith.

The spirit of the Powers tempts us to look at the instability of existence
And long for a risk-free world. It is a spirit of intimidation that wants to define for us a reality of fearfulness. But that is not our reality. Jesus says to his followers: "Behold, I send you out like sheep into the midst of wolves."

As Jack Stotts said, that is not a threat. That is Jesus charging you to be worthy.
To use the courage faith gives you. Use your gifts, your faith, your knowledge.
Jesus is not dousing your enthusiasm; he is elevating it. Jesus is not discouraging you, but encouraging you.

Our call as Christians is the highest task: to stand up against the powers that would frighten, intimidate and diminish human life, and use the strength and heart of the faith we have been given.

The way we test our faithfulness is simply to ask ourselves: Have I used that armor of faith I've been given? Have I done something daring, risk taking?

Of course, our courage, our "heart" is rooted in love. As Paul wrote in Romans 8, about the true power of the love of God versus the Powers of the age: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Martin Luther started the Protestant reformation because he stood up and challenged the Powers that be. In so doing, he changed the church and changed the world. The words of his most famous hymn still give us courage:

And though this world with devils filled,
Should threaten to un-do us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed,
His truth to triumph through us.

The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure, for lo! His doom is sure.
One little word shall fell him.

One little word shall fell him. The one word: Jesus.
Let the Spirit of Jesus rule over you, over the whole of our lives, and this world that is wrapped in God's love.
Amen.

Sources:

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