

New Brunswick Theological Seminary
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Baccalaureate Sermon
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“Our Struggle”

Lesson: Ephesians 6:10-17

Our text comes near the end of the letter to the Ephesians. As you remember, the letter is addressed to Gentile Christians. The author in the voice of Paul here impresses the “greatness” the “power” of Christ on them, speaks of their gifts they’ve been given, of the building up of the church, and he exhorts them to speak the truth, be pure, keep their household in order. Then after all that, in his summing up, we find our text. “Our struggle” (ημιν η παλη), he says—speaking of being a Christian—is a struggle “not with blood and flesh, that is, not with human beings, but with—and then he gives a list: it is a struggle with rulers (αρχας), with authorities (εξουσιας), with cosmic powers of this present darkness (τους κοσμοκρατορας του σκοτος τουτου), with spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (τα πνευματικα της πονηριας εν τοις επουρανιοις).

It’s that struggle that I want to lift up this evening. Now the language of struggle is a language familiar at New Brunswick Seminary. Acquiring all the course credits, juggling family and career, dealing with the challenges of theological disciplines: all of that’s a struggle. And this weekend is partly a celebration that it’s over. I congratulate you. But I add two things: one is that, of course, there’s a positive sense to the struggle; it’s a struggle for growth after all, and not perhaps entirely a struggle against enemies; and the other is, that it’s not over. And that brings us back to the text.

The author says our struggle is with powers of darkness, spiritual forces of evil! And it's true that doesn't sound positive. It certainly sounds like he's saying that our struggle as Christians is against enemies, against evil spirits in fact. And I think he is saying that, but in a sense a little different than we might expect. In fact the list is closely related to several other NT passages, in Paul's letters especially, that speak of, and similarly list, what we call generally "the Powers." There are various names for them, including the ones we see here—rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, spiritual forces—but the terms seem to be more or less interchangeable and what they refer to is intriguing. And they're not purely negative.

These powers, these unseen forces, are the forces that govern and dominate daily existence. It's true that Paul gives them names that sound strange to us, but as the theologian Walter Wink has argued, they point to a reality that we recognize in our lives as well. For there are powerful invisible structures that determine much about our daily lives too. We call them corporations, institutions, and government, and the media, and fashion, and law, and the forms of education, the culture of a people, and—maybe most powerful of all--the economy. As I name them, you see how much they shape and determine us. Yet they are invisible, and you can't touch them. But they are very real.

So if our struggle is with the powers, are these powers *evil spirits* then? Well, yes but also in a sense no. For in their origin these Powers are *not* evil; they're creatures of God, like everything else in creation. So the writer of Colossians says: "all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through Christ and for him." And Paul in Romans (13) says, there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God." And Christ, in being raised to heaven, is Lord of the powers. That's what Paul means in the eighth

chapter of Romans when he names the Powers, when he and says not they or anything else will separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And yet in this world as it is—in this present moment, before the end of time, as the NT understands it, that reconciliation with God that Paul speaks of exists paradoxically *already but also not yet*. For reasons finally as inexplicable but as real as Sin itself, in the world as it is now these powers, these structures of our very life, become demonic—that is, they tend behave as though they were God, they take over, they menace. So the economy—a power created by God—becomes the engine of chronic injustice; the culture of a people—God-given-- tends to turn in on itself and becomes the engine of racism, institutions such as schools, corporations, governments—all of which are the very form of the human society we were created to live in—in their very impulse to self-preservation threaten to consume and dehumanize people rather than support them. So it is that the Powers act as, in our author’s words, “the cosmic powers of this present darkness,” the “spiritual forces of evil”—they do become the evil spirits, though in their origin, in their created nature, they are not evil.

So our struggle is with the powers. And that struggle describes the ministry in particular.

The most obvious sense in which the ministry is a struggle with the powers, is that it calls us to speak with the prophetic voice, speaking the truth *to* the Powers. Earlier in Ephesians (3:10), there is the great passage that describe this job of the church: saying that the church was given the gospel “so that the wisdom of God... might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places,” that is, to the Powers. The church explains to the powers their proper place in the Creation, their right subordination to the rule of Christ. As leaders of the church, this is part of what you do. It is a task you know something about in a very specific way from your courses here in ethics and public theology and ministry studies, and a sermon in

itself; but I note that part of that task is also to speak *to* the church itself, for the church after all, as an institution, also a Power, and also subject to the tendencies of the Powers to become their own ends, to serve themselves. I think for example here of James Cone's persistent critique of white churches for ignoring the fact of racism and thereby participating in it. When I hear that critique, I not only recognize the Word of God to the Powers, but I feel my own part in the very perversion of the Powers—my own participation in what the author calls the spiritual powers of evil.

Another sense in which the ministry is a struggle with the powers, is that in a certain sense as Christian ministers, our very *way of exercising power*, is itself our equipment, our breastplate as the author might put it, in the struggle against the Powers. It's certainly true that as a person in the office of minister you are in authority in an institution. But, in my experience as a pastor anyway, my surest and greatest power was exercised through, you could say, my lack of power. Think of yourself in a hospital room, with someone dying. You have no power to keep that person from dying. But you are bringing the gospel to them, not by dispensing something to them from a privileged or powerful position, but entering their space and sharing precisely in the reality of dying—in Henri Nouwen's wonderful phrase, not *curing* but *caring*. This move is not unrelated to what Paul reports (2 Cor. 12:9) as the Lord's revelation to him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." A truth that, in turn of course, is the truth of the cross itself, which, as Paul tells us elsewhere, is what finally "dethrones" the Powers, and shows them their proper place.

And there's yet another way in which in the ministry our struggle is with the powers. And that's in our own honesty with ourselves, our own accepting *for ourselves* of the message of God's grace. For the Powers that structure our lives are not only *out there*; they're also *in here*,

in the attitudes and structures and languages and culture that we take into ourselves to order our lives. This is not bad in itself, remember; the Powers are God's creation. But their tendency is to become ends in themselves and thus demons, and that is as true when they're inside us as it is when they're outside. And our impulse to *justify* ourselves, to become our own ultimate value, to live for ourselves, is the quintessential behavior of those Powers that have become, as our text says, "spiritual forces of evil." Right there inside of us. Rather we need to remind ourselves that we do not justify ourselves, but we are already justified by God through the grace of Jesus Christ, and it in that grace that we act. And that reminder—daily, hourly—is our surest weapon, our breastplate and sword, as the authors would have it, in our struggle with the Powers.

And the message is of course not just for the graduates, though I've been addressing them particularly. Our struggle—the struggle for all of us—is a struggle with the Powers. And the good news, the gospel, is that this is a struggle to proclaim and realize something already true—that they are not our lords, they do not exist for their own benefit—that Christ is the Lord of the powers.

Thanks be to God.