

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Non-Violent Holy War

(Fifth in a series on the letter to the Ephesians)

Our struggle is not against merely human enemies, but against the powers that be, the systems and institutions and entrenched patterns of evil (war, violence, slavery, racism, sexism, nationalism, and the like) which perpetuate conflict, cruelty and suffering generation after generation. So make use of everything in God's armoury, because you will need all the help you can get. – Ephesians 6:10-24

Early in the Second World War, one day after France surrendered to Nazi Germany, a pastor in the small Protestant church in the French village of Le Chambon sur Ligno preached a sermon on this passage from Ephesians. He said, "The responsibility of Christians is to resist the violence that will be brought to bear on their consciences with the weapons of the spirit."¹ The members of that little church listened to that sermon, and over the next few years, they provided sanctuary for 5,000 Jewish refugees from the Holocaust.

In the midst of the great lie that is anti-Semitism, they held fast to the truth that we are all God's children. In the face of the enormous injustice of genocide, they found a way to pursue justice. In a horrifically violent context they witnessed to the gospel of peace. They found the faith to do the right thing in the midst of overwhelming fear and temptation. Instead of seeking to save themselves from the Nazis, they placed their trust in God's salvation. And in the face of Nazi propaganda, they encouraged each other with God's word of life. Today, they are remembered with admiration because they stood firm against tyranny.

In every generation, there are great moral questions that have to be addressed, and on which each generation will be judged. Most people will, as Martin Luther King pointed out, simply reflect the prevailing public opinion, just as thermometers display the temperature. But what Christians are called to do – we often fail, to be sure, but what we are called to do, according to Martin Luther King – is to be more like thermostats than thermometers. A thermometer displays the temperature in your home; a thermostat changes it. If it is too cold, the thermostat tells the furnace to pump out more heat. If it is too hot, it shuts the furnace down to allow the home to cool down. In the same way, Christians are called not just to reflect public opinion, but to influence it, to seek justice and resist evil, in the words of our United Church creed.

¹ Weapons of the Spirit, prod. and dir. Pierre Sauvage (First Run Features, 1989, videocassette); quoted in Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown (2011-05-31). Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3, Kindle location, 13406.

That will sometimes make us unpopular, and that can be challenging. Most people like to fit in, to conform to popular opinion. It is uncomfortable to dissent, to stand out, to be different, especially in a conflicted situation. But the letter to the Ephesians urges us to stand firm against evil, against the trickery of the tempter, against all the forces that perpetuate conflict, cruelty and suffering, to stand firm for justice, for peace, for equality, for the love of God in the world.

There is a difference though between standing firm and being stubborn. Paul is not asking us to be stubborn, close-minded, unwilling to listen to reason. In fact standing firm for a principle may require us to be adaptable and nimble in terms of how we defend that principle. I bet those French villagers were constantly figuring out new strategies for hiding their Jewish guests. I doubt they were stubborn or close-minded about those things. I bet they had a lot of passionate debates about what they were doing and how they were doing it.

We will often disagree about how to defend a principle. And a good open debate about how to reduce poverty, for example, is usually a good thing. I think that the best way to reduce poverty is to have progressive social legislation. Another might think it is to grow the economy. We may both be right, but we can have a healthy debate about the specifics of what tax rates can support good public services without undermining a healthy economy, about the right levels for minimum wages and subsidized housing and the like. We can and should call on evidence and try to convince one another without demonizing the other's point of view.

But when it comes to basic principles, when it comes to fundamental convictions about good and evil, then we need to stand firm, and others may well accuse us of being stubborn, narrow, and inflexible. Martin Luther King was once called an extremist. He responded that he was originally disappointed at being called that, but that he warmed to the description: "Was not Jesus an extremist for love [in saying] 'Love your enemies...?' Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.' Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.' Was not Martin Luther an extremist: 'Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise, so help me God.' And John Bunyan: 'I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.' And Abraham Lincoln: 'This nation cannot exist half slave and half free.' And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...'" So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?"²

That's what we are talking about today, standing firm for justice, love, and peace. There will often be people who are critical, people who do their best to oppose the good we are standing for, who even try to destroy us. But they are not the enemy. The enemy is not flesh and blood,

² "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in *King Remembered*, 281.

according to Paul. The traditional translation is that our struggle is “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” That is easy to misunderstand, but at its heart it is the language of power. One of the people who has helped us understand the biblical language of power was a lay theologian named William Stringfellow. Stringfellow was a lawyer who worked among the most impoverished people in New York City, and his experience was that the people who understood the Powers the best were those who suffered at their hands: the poor trying to negotiate government bureaucracies, racial minorities dealing with the racism among the police; tenants dealing with landlords; employees caught between employers on the one hand and corrupt unions on the other. Stringfellow discovered that “when the biblical image of the powers and principalities is recovered from the dustbin, it shines a revealing light on the modern landscape... In unmasking the powers, one thinks of segregation, apartheid, fatalism, the Mafia, addiction,... totalitarian states, a celebrity culture of glamorized Bad Girls and Boys,... attempted bribery of legislatures through large campaign contributions, and genocide. Depersonalization creates a long gray line of faceless folk who [are thought of] as no more than a Social Security number. One thinks of Nazi philosophy, unbridled nationalism, violence, hunger, racism, obscenity, addiction, brothels in Mumbai, nuclear weapons, and tobacco companies.”³

The language of power is about powerful systems, powerful institutions, like governments, armies, police forces, businesses, organizations, nations, even churches. The biblical language of power is about those institutions and their personalities. The personality of an institution is what give a business, a nation, or an organization a character that endures, even as individuals die and are replaced with new ones. And when an institution becomes corrupt, it isn't enough to replace a few individuals. You have change the institution's personality, and that is a very hard thing to do. It takes conflict. It takes struggle.

How do you struggle against such enemies? How do you struggle against racism in the RCMP or pedophilia in the Roman Catholic church? How do you turn around a declining business or a declining church for that matter? How do you stamp out sexual harassment in a business, militarism in a nation, or unsustainable practices in a society? These are enormous problems, huge enemies, monstrous enemies. They are mountainous problems, but as Jesus said, faith can move a mountain. And the early Christians believed him. They took on the Roman Empire, gladiatorial games, and a host of other monsters. And they found ways to challenge and eventually overcome them. It took a little longer for Christian social activists to do away with slavery, child labour and oppressive work places, but we did that too. Through sustained struggle with the spirituality of an institution, it can be redeemed.

My title for this sermon is intentionally provocative, picking up on the use of military imagery in the reading. Can there be such a thing as a non-violent holy war? There have been quite a few

³ Feasting on the Word, *ob cit.*

violent ones. But no war can truly be holy if it pursues holy ends by unholy means. Even if you believe a violent war is justified, it is always a compromise with evil. If we must have soldiers, as Reinhold Niebuhr once said, we should have sad soldiers. But a non-violent struggle against poverty, against pollution, against climate change, against drugs, against war itself, against anti-Semitism on the one hand and the occupation of Palestine on the other, against evil in any of its many forms – that might truly be a holy war worth fighting!

I want to close with the story of one quite remarkable victory. Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years in prison for his opposition to apartheid in South Africa. He was sent to prison for a campaign of vandalism, which was not very effective. So while in prison he refined his strategy. He started making friends with his jailers, most of whom were Afrikaners, the descendants of Dutch Boer immigrants who were the main proponents of apartheid. Mandela realized that the real enemy was not white South Africans, or Afrikaners, or even racists. The real enemy was the personality of the nation, a split personality which set whites and blacks and Asians and mixed race people against each other. If he was to heal that split he had to win over his enemies and enlist all South Africans as allies in that struggle.

There is a book called *Playing the Enemy* about how Mandela went about winning over his enemies. The book was made into a movie called *Invictus*, which I consider the greatest sport movie ever made. But the book is even better. The book and the movie tell the story of how Mandela set about trying to win over the white Afrikaners who were the strongest and most violent opponents of the new democracy. He did it through rugby. Rugby is the great passion of Afrikaners, but few black or coloured people played the game or paid much attention to it. But when Mandela made friends with his jailers, many of whom were Afrikaners, he realized how passionate they were about rugby. So he studied the game so that he could talk to them about something they cared about. And he realized that when he cared about what they cared about, they stopped seeing him as a prisoner and began to respect him. Mandela realized that the game of rugby held the key to changing the personality of South Africa. He became a fan of rugby.

Well Mandela was released from prison, the elections were held and Mandela became the first black president. But tensions were still high. There was a very real danger that right-wing Afrikaners would unleash a bloody civil war in South Africa. But right at the most dangerous time, South Africa hosted the Rugby World Cup and the national team, the Springboks, composed mostly of Afrikaners, was a contender. The Afrikaners worship the Springboks like Canadians worship their Olympic hockey teams. But the Springboks had been all-white for decades, and most of the black population despised the team. Even by the time of the World Cup, there was only one coloured player on the team. Even so, Mandela publicly supported them every step of the way. And when Mandela appeared on the rugby pitch of the final of the World Cup, wearing a Springbok jersey, to the wild cheering of South Africans of every stripe, it was over. He had won over the enemy, by loving what they loved. It was one of the most brilliant

victories of the modern era, against overwhelming odds. He did it without firing a shot, but by employing the most powerful weapon in God's armoury – the love of enemies. Amen.