

Ephesians 6:10-20
August 15, 2021
"The Fight"
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Okay, so it's a "good news", "bad news" sermon. First, the "bad news".

The "**bad news**" is that we're in a *fight*. And not just a fight, but *the* fight. *In fact, being in the fight* is the Church's **chief reason for being**. Which means, by the way, that all those other ways you've ever heard people pushing Jesus, or promoting the Church -- promising all kinds of **wonderful benefits** -- they may have been leaving out some important details.

Because Jesus *came*, in fact, **to pick the fight we're in**. He did this by proclaiming that "the kingdom of heaven [God] is at hand" (Mt. 4:17) -- a new realm, the realm of heaven, where God rules over all -- is invading the life of the world, and then again in Mt. 10:7, **this time** making it *clear* what this proclamation means: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt. 10:34).

And we, his Church, are his *enlistees*, his "**armed forces**". But the fact that we're in **the** fight that *Jesus* came to pick -- *versus* all of the *other* fights we might involve ourselves with in the life of this world -- is actually the "good news". It means that with *every passing day*, as long we are fighting, the **tide of battle** is *turning*.

Well, this is, I hope, an ear-catching entry into this morning's reading from Eph. 6, a passage very near the end of the Letter, which is why it begins with "**Finally...**" Paul is *summing up* here all that he has discussed in the preceding 5 chapters, and telling the fledgling Christian churches he is writing to what the **practical upshot** of it all is. And it is **this**: that, as the Church, we have joined in the fight Jesus started. And it is raging *now* at a fever pitch.

Through his death on the cross and resurrection, you see, Jesus has "taken the fight to the **enemy**". He allowed himself to be thrown into, but was then powerfully raised from, that realm which the enemy *used to think* was their *invincible* stronghold, namely the **realm of death**. By being willing to use all the powers of death -- ranging from the simple *denial* of other people's *humanity*, to sustaining systemic *injustices* against others, *depriving* them of *hope*, to actual *physical* death -- the **enemy** believed they *ruled*, and *would* rule, the life of the world, *forever*.

Such that, since the first Easter, the enemy -- what Paul identifies as some malevolent alliance of "rulers", "authorities", "cosmic powers" and the "spiritual forces of evil" (KJV: "principalities and powers") -- has been **enraged and vengeful**, *always*, of course, seeking to wreak **havoc** of all kinds in human *social*

life, as well as havoc of all kinds in *individual* human souls, but seeking *now*, above all else, to **bury** Jesus' Church -- those who have come together and committed themselves to living in *transformed* ways which prove the *world-transforming truth* of Jesus' resurrection -- under a never-ceasing *onslaught*.

Now, I know this sounds like an *awfully* dramatic, and maybe even a *little bit* farfetched rendering of our lives in this world, and of our life-together as Jesus' Church in the world. Some hearing it may find it to be unnecessarily "spooky", and so really *not* very useful in the 21st-century.

But, of course, that's just what the **enemy** wants you to believe. That is, as Paul puts it, the "**wiles** of the devil" (6:11) having his way with you!

What, we have to ask -- if we are *willing* to be **curious**, and *seriously* thoughtful about our lives in this world *at all* -- is the **source** of what Paul calls "this present darkness" -- a "darkness" which almost 2,000 years later you and I can still affirm as being "present" in our world today. All around us, every day, right here in Greenville County -- and all over the globe -- people are living lives which almost *none of them* would ever **choose** to live. But they're living them anyway. Aren't you curious enough to wonder "Why?"

Paul knows why. He knows we humans are up against **forces** which cannot be overpowered by our appropriation of even the wisest moral teachings -- even from Jesus -- forces which cannot be overcome, *i.e.*, by mere reason and logic, even by people of goodwill, and acting with the best of intentions.

This contradicts, of course, the way we *prefer* to think of ourselves, of course, namely as **rational** beings, with our reason ruling over our emotions (the Greek ideal), such that **changing ourselves**, or our *world*, is just a matter of our **choosing**, as *individuals*, correctly, *viz.*, *wisely*. Those living lives they wouldn't **choose** to live, we like to say, **have in fact chosen** them. They just haven't chosen wisely. But it is this *preferred* self-image of ours -- as rational, freely choosing -- creatures which in fact keeps us from learning the lessons of history, because we ignore the "principalities and powers" at work.

So, how might we best think about these?

As evil giant financial conglomerates, or global multinationals, who *intentionally* **defraud** the public? This is a popular image. The financial crisis of 2008? Was it all a big, premeditated plot by the giant subprime mortgage lender, Countrywide? And what about "Big Pharma", who somehow managed to *double* the market price of the life-saving drug, insulin -- discovered in the 1920s -- by 100% between 2012 and 2020? Are *they* the "principalities and powers" we should be going after, and once we finally nail them, then our troubles will be over? No. As Paul says (6:12), "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh..." *They* are just "blood and flesh". Ask them, their PR people, their CEOs,

and their shareholders, and they will all tell you -- with *complete sincerity* -- that they are doing **unadulterated good** in the world.

That's the way the "principalities and powers" -- whose bidding they are *actually* doing *when they defraud* -- **train** you to *see*, and to *explain*, things.

The "principalities and powers" are not *just corporate*, however, *either* in the sense of actual corporations, or simply in the sense of the mindlessly violent ways in which human beings as a **mob** are capable of behaving (cf. some of the street marches summer a year ago, and the 1/6/21 attack on the US Capitol). The "principalities and powers" are also deeply, **deeply personal**, deeply **interior**. The truth is that we human beings *routinely*, and *profoundly*, defraud *ourselves*, deceive *ourselves*, hurt **ourselves**.

E.g., we do and say things in our relationships with other people and then, looking back on it, don't really understand *why*. We **long** for deep, gratifying **connection** with others -- our siblings, our spouses, our friends -- but then we habitually behave in ways which work against that being the case. Marriages dissolve, and the two people don't *really*, at the end of it, know *why*. We **self-sabotage**. Some of us are so afraid of **failure**, have so *little* confidence in ourselves, that we *shut ourselves off* to opportunities in life which we might well have succeeded in taking advantage of. Some of us are so afraid of **succeeding** that, when we *do*, we do things to *undermine* ourselves. And when we look *inward*, to try to *understand* ourselves, *why* we do what we do, *why* we are where we are in life, we discover that we are a **mystery to ourselves**.

And these destructive, and self-destructive patterns of relationship and behavior -- isn't it mysterious how they continue in families down through generations?

And then consider the **mystery** of our **political convictions**, which are so **powerfully determinative** of *how* we view *ourselves*, and *other people*, and how we believe we *ought* to live and relate with others. But *how* did we **acquire** these convictions? What is their origin, their source? Is it the Scriptures? Many of us are willing to cite Biblical passages in explicit support of our views on this or that issue. Shouldn't we be able to do the same with regard to **all** of our moral, social, political, economic views -- as absolutely **intertwined** as they all *intrinsically* are?

Cf. Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics & Religion* (2012): when making moral decisions, **intuitions** come first and reasoning second. Where do these "intuitions", these -- **sub-rational**? **Pre-rational**? -- parts of our **souls** -- come from? By what forces did our souls come to be **formed and shaped** as they are? And can **immersion** in the life of the Church **re-form, re-shape** our souls in terms of these "intuitions" -- our most fundamental motivations and inclinations?

If we as the Church are **in** the fight that Jesus started -- against all the "powers and principalities" determined to **deform**, and *disfigure*, human *life*, and human *lives*, in *countless* ways -- it's **critically important** that we be able to do just this, *viz.*, **re-form** and **re-shape** human souls, *change* people's fundamental "world-views", and **train** and *equip* people with *transformed* -- and *transforming* -- moral habits. Because if we **cannot**, or we **will** not do this, we -- individually *and* together -- don't stand a chance against the *onslaught* of the enemy.

You should know that the traditional understanding of the role of the Church in the world is to serve as the *ecclesia militans*, *viz.*, the "fighting Church". What do you think about us here at St. Matthew? Are we an "effective fighting force"?

Effective fighting forces in our world take the work of re-shaping, re-forming, not just the bodies, but the souls of their enlistees **with complete seriousness**, because they take accomplishing their **mission** with *complete seriousness*. Cf. the Marine Corps: at Parris Island they break you down and remake you. You come as a **civilian**, and you leave -- by virtue of the intensive training -- as a **Marine**, with a whole new view of yourself and others, and a new set of both physical and mental disciplines. And with "**semper fi**" -- short for "*semper fidelis*", *viz.*, "always **faithful**".

Do **we**, as the Church, take accomplishing *our* mission -- to join in the fight that Jesus started -- with the *same*, *viz.*, with **complete** seriousness? Because complete seriousness means **we commit to** undergoing the same kind of "**conversion**" that the USMC accomplishes at Parris Island, to **putting the mission first** in our lives, to **continual training**, and, finally, to **mutual accountability** ("got each other's back").

All of this equates to what Paul *urges* on the Church when, speaking in the 2nd-person plural imperative, he says, "take up the **whole armor** of God" (6:13): truth, righteousness, peace, faith and salvation -- *these* are the "wonderful benefits" of Jesus and the Church. But they are conveyed in order that we may fight effectively, *first* by withstanding the blows of the enemy, and *then* by learning how to effectively use our *only* **offensive** weapon, "the **sword of the Spirit**, which is the word of God" (v. 17). It is with "the sword of the Spirit", *i.e.*, that we *find* a way, *make* a way -- some *loving, healing, persuasive* way -- into the lives of others, such that the Spirit of God might enter **their** lives *too*, and compel them to join *with* us in "**The Fight**".