

*Evil* is a pretty strong word. Even in church, it's not a word that tends to get thrown around a lot. And yet in today's epistle reading, St. Paul uses it five times. (To be precise, he actually uses two different Greek words that both get translated in the NRSV as *evil*; the second of those words is sometimes translated as *wicked*.) Paul is not talking about the Hollywood version of evil in horror films, or the way that "Dr. Evil" is caricatured by Mike Myers in *Austin Powers* or the Broadway show, *Wicked*. He's talking about "the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God." (BCP 302)

Sin and evil are closely related, but they are not the same. Evil is kind of like sin on steroids, I think. In trying to distinguish them, I Googled both words together earlier this week. (This is not necessarily something I would recommend to people interested in doing serious theological reflection.) But in this case, my surfing led me to this distinction, which I found helpful as a starting place:

Evil is intentional. Sin harms, evil *seeks* to harm. Sin misses the mark, evil doesn't even aim at the target. Lack of consideration for others is sin; lying about others maliciously is evil. Wrecking the Exxon Valdez was a mistake, a sin. Crashing jets into the World Trade Center was intentional, an evil. <http://www.susancanthy.com/aboutsusan/biblesin.html>

In the second section of Romans, Paul eloquently argued that we are all sinners. Those with the Torah and those without it: all fall short of the glory of God, and therefore all rely on the mercy of God. But when we see the level of pain willfully caused by a Hitler (or a bin Laden or Saddam Hussein or Qaddafi) then our theological vocabulary requires a word like "evil."

In addition to intentionality, though, the word evil tends to point us toward something more cosmic, something that is bigger than a few individuals. Evil is a kind of web. I think of the insight in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*: and the realization that even the bankers—even the bank *presidents*—can't change the banking system which takes on a life of its own, and destroys the creatures of God.

That insight might just as easily be applied today to Wall Street, or the U.S. Congress: redeeming these institutions takes more than good people, especially if the institution itself is seriously ill. Good people are more likely to get "infected" than to bring about lasting health. That isn't to let leaders off the hook: it's simply to try to describe what the work entails, which includes becoming more deeply aware of what that great American theologian, Bruce Springsteen, noted in "Johnny 99" – "*sir, I guess there's just a meanness in this world.*"

So what do we do about that? How does a person of faith confront evil? If we aren't careful, we will become what we hate. That can happen in the fight against terrorism; it can also happen in our neighborhoods and in our homes, as things begin to whirl out of control. So what do we do?

A decade or so ago I read an enormously helpful trilogy by a New Testament scholar named Walter Wink. His topic is "the powers and principalities" which is the Biblical way of speaking about that cosmic nature of evil, our battle against that which is not just "flesh and blood." The first volume is called *Naming the Powers*. The second is called *Unmasking the Powers*. And the third is called *Engaging the Powers*. I think that is how we begin to confront evil: by naming,

unmasking, and engaging. All of those books have subtitles, but it's the subtitle of that last volume that I want to mention as we turn our attention to the latter half of the twelfth chapter of Romans: *Engaging the Powers—Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*.

Last weekend, when we explored the first half of chapter twelve, I tried to say that St. Paul's imperial context matters: that empires are about domination and subordination. Paul's advice to us is an invitation to become a living sacrifice to God, to be transformed into the Body of Christ rather than being conformed to the world. To be "the Church" in the midst of empire is to bearing witness to the Kingdom of God in the face of all that means to destroy the creatures of God in this world.

But it's not just in Romans. *Empire is the context for most of the Bible*. As it turns out the Bible gives a lot of thought to this issue of engaging the powers, and to what it means to be discerning resisters in a world of domination.

In the Old Testament (and especially in these readings we've been hearing over the past few weeks from the Book of Exodus) Egypt is more than a backdrop with its pyramids and mummies. What God's people, God's *enslaved* people, learn in the Exodus story (and remember every Passover) is discernment and resistance in a world of domination. That's what Shiprah and Puah and Miriam and Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter were up to when they engaged in acts of civil disobedience and resist Pharaoh's unjust edict to kill all Hebrew boys. They operate "under the radar," making it possible for Moses to survive, and then to lead God's people across the Sea of Reeds as the journey toward freedom begins.

At the other end of the Old Testament, from the time leading up to the Exile to the Exile itself and then finally when they come back home, God's people confront first the Babylonian Empire and then the Persian Empire. There, too—from Lamentations to Jeremiah to Ezekiel's valley of dry bones to Isaiah 40—God's people are learning discernment and resistance in a world of domination: *they are being transformed so that they can mount up with wings like eagles, so they can run and not be weary...*

The New Testament spans a much shorter historical period than the Old Testament, so there is just one empire to deal with: Rome. From Paul's Letters to the Gospels to the Book of Revelation, references to Rome's imperial power are never far from the surface. Think about how that familiar story of Jesus' birth is situated within the context of empire—in *those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered*. And at the other end of Jesus' life, however we may understand the meaning of the power of the cross *theologically*, we need to be clear that this Jewish man is executed by the Empire for political reasons, for challenging Roman authority: *"he said that he was the King of the Jews."*

In the Gospels we see the Empire from the vantage point of an occupied territory, Palestine. The Christians in Rome to whom Paul writes in this Letter to the Romans, however, live at the very center of imperial power. He knows it requires discernment to name and unmask the powers, and resistance to engage them. So listen again to the words he writes to those first-century Christians living in the very heart of the empire:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

When we try to fight evil with evil, we are in danger of becoming what we hate. Evil begets more evil. As Ghandi put it, "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

In two weeks we'll mark a decade since the events of that tragic day on September 11, 2001. What should we remember? The appointed gospel reading in two weeks is all about forgiveness. Sometimes I hear people say, "I'll never forgive the terrorists." Or maybe, I can forgive, but I will never forget. My answer is that we don't have to forget; in fact we need to remember. But we need to remember rightly. And when we feel hurt, or vulnerable, it turns out that remembering rightly is a very challenging thing to do. It's all too easy to fall into the trap of remembering in ways that re-victimize us. Sometimes in our anger and hurt, we mis-remember things. It was also Ghandi who wisely noted, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong."

Evil didn't just appear on a clear day in September ten years ago out of nowhere. And it will not disappear from our world, at least not until the fulfillment of human history, when Christ is Sovereign over all. We live "in the meantime," and in the meantime we need—in small and large ways—to practice becoming a people who can discern and then resist evil. Paul says that if you try to overcome evil with evil, you won't like what you become. Evil will always win. You overcome evil with good: give your enemies food and a drink of water and leave the vengeance part to God. Keep your own heart focused on love, on doing good.

*You don't overcome evil with evil.* Not only because you shouldn't do that, but because it doesn't work. If you try to overcome evil with evil it ends up consuming you. *Rather, you must overcome evil with good.* You confront evil with love, and forgiveness. As Eugene Peterson puts it: "Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good." (*The Message*) Naming, unmasking, and engaging the powers turns out to be extremely difficult work—whether you are talking about global politics or a dispute with your next-door neighbor. It's easy to be conformed to this world, a world where violence begets violence. To correctly discern God's we need to allow God to transform our hearts and minds. It means remembering rightly and practicing forgiveness. It means resisting the powers of domination with love—not soft sentimentality, but the love of God made known in Christ, a love that makes all things new and all things possible.