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People love a good fight. You might even say it's in our nature. We love fights so much that we turn everything into a fight. Finding a parking space, buying a TV, health care reform. Even pacifists love fights. Here's an example. A year out of college I worked for a national peace organization, and the other interns and I got into an argument – in other words a fight – about whether or not pacifists should partake of Arnold Schwarzenegger movies. I was in the pro-Arnold camp, but the point here is that even the anti-Arnolds fought about it. If that doesn't prove my point, I don't know what does!

Now, fighting or struggling or competing – those aren't necessarily bad things. Competition can fire in us a desire to do our best, to go further, faster, higher. We can fight poverty or cancer; we can struggle for a better world. Some degree of this is healthy and beneficial. But we start running into trouble when our fights become personal. There is a surprisingly thin line, for example, between fighting poverty and fighting the poor. Or to get out of the grandiose and into the ordinary, consider all the ways in which everyday struggles get focused on people. A crowd of tired workers trying to get home at the end of the day become those jerks who cut me off in traffic! The boss, who is under her own pressure to produce results, becomes the tyrant who's breathing down my neck! The toddler who is having so much fun playing blocks that he can't be bothered to change his diaper becomes the plague of my existence!

A person or people become the focus of our combative spirit, the focus of our anger, and the problem is that in any fight, we are on the right side. Yes? My side is the right one; that's why I'm on it. And we know there can only be one right side, which means the other side is wrong, and so anyone on that side is wrong, and therefore we are engaged in a holy war! If competition is human nature, so is our tendency to identify our opponents as bad buys, which justifies anything we do in the fight against them. Because they're evil and we're good. Theology a la Schwarzenegger.

Religion is not the source of this sacred violence. Atheists are just as capable of this kind of fighting as are religionists. But it does play out in a particularly graphic form in religion, which is what makes a passage like today's from Ephesians a bit disturbing. And we should be disturbed by the specter of religious violence. Horrible, horrific crimes have been committed in the name of religion, where the ordinary division of good and evil gets elevated to the level of God and the devil. But what irony that the Lamb of God who gave his life to set his murderers free, has been invoked by those who would murder in his name! Not mere irony – blasphemy!

But before I get carried away, we need to read our Bibles more carefully. If we really listen to what the gospels tell us, we find that they never command us to go to war with our fellow human beings. Paul states quite boldly here, "for our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood." That should be our motto. Put it on bumper stickers; tattoo it to our forearms so it will be ever before us to remind us. Our struggle is *never* against enemies of flesh and blood. It is instead against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic power of darkness, the spiritual forces of evil.

Okay, so what is all that? The rulers, like the President? The authorities – is that the police? Schoolteachers? Parents? The government? When we start asking those questions, we're looking at it the wrong way. Anytime we start identifying any human beings with the cosmic powers of darkness, we're getting it wrong. No, when the Bible talks about Satan, the satanic, the demonic, the devil, although it often speaks as if Satan is a person, it really is speaking about a power. It's a

power that works through human beings, but it is beyond the human. Walter Wink, in his book *Naming the Powers*, puts it this way:

“...[T]he legitimations, seats of authority, hierarchical systems, ideological justifications, and punitive sanctions which their human incumbents exercise and which transcend these incumbents in both time and power. It is the superhuman dimension of power in institutions and the cosmos which must be fought, not the mere human agent. For the institution will guarantee the replacement of *this* person with another virtually the same, who despite personal preferences will replicate decisions made by a whole string of predecessors because that is what the institution requires for its survival. It is this superhuman quality which accounts for the apparent ‘heavenly,’ bigger than life, quasi-eternal character of the Powers.” (pp. 85-86)

I really do wish these theologians would use English, but he’s talking about a system, institutions that take on a life of their own. But also a chaotic spirit that can turn a crowd into a mob. And here’s an excellent example that’s been in the news a lot lately, these town hall meetings on health care reform. People showing up to these meetings wearing guns, yelling and screaming and physically attacking one another, waving signs comparing the president to Hitler. I mean – seriously? It’s not that people can’t have differing opinions on health care, but what’s happening at these meetings is not a discussion or even a debate. It’s become a holy war in all its ugliness and brutality and violence. And racism, unfortunately, becomes a part of it. Again, I’m not saying that everyone who disagrees with the proposed health care legislation is a sheet-wearing member of the Klan. I’m not even saying that everyone sporting guns or waving Obama = Hitler signs are. But it does happen that some people who disagree with the President, or who are angry or frightened over the proposed legislation – sometimes they inadvertently start tapping into racist rhetoric in order to express their dissent. They’re not intentionally or even consciously racist. But without even realizing it they tap into racist concepts. They become, as it were, possessed by a malignant spirit.

Racism is actually a really, really good example of what Paul is talking about with these cosmic powers of darkness, what Wink was talking about as he expressed it. Racism is in part a history of institutions that date from the time of slavery that privilege some people and penalize others. That institutional history has power even when the people who make it up reject racism. It’s why one in three black men is in prison. But racism is also an underlying way of thinking and seeing the world that colors (pun intended) people’s perceptions even when they don’t want it to, so that women clutch their purses when black men walk by, or police end up arresting Henry Louis Gates in his own home. Racism is a demonic force that has power of its own, that manifests in us, possesses us, even when we don’t want it to, even if we consciously reject it. That, my friends, is what bondage to sin really means. It’s why all of us have it, and none of us can ever break free from it. But. what is impossible for people is not impossible for God.

And so we return to our passage in Ephesians. As Christians, we are called to battle, to struggle, even to war. But our fight is with this evil spiritual force, not with any enemies of flesh and blood. Because we are *all* enslaved by that evil spiritual force, and none of us can be free unless all of us are free. So conventional tactics of violence won’t work because they will only perpetuate the system, a system which claims that some people are enemies, on the wrong side, evil, and they must be defeated and killed. That can never be our approach. Instead, God has shown us a better way.

Paul says that in order to be ready for battle, we need to put on the whole armor of God so that we’ll be able to stand firm on that evil day and resist being possessed by that evil spiritual force. It is no surprise then that the armament Paul talks about is entirely spiritual in nature. Fasten the belt of truth around your waist. The trick here, the deception of that

ultimate trickster the devil, is that we all too often equate truth with “what I believe.” But there’s that false premise again, the mistaken notion that I am always on the right side. No, this belt is of God’s truth, the truth that sets us free. It is the truth that God alone is good, that God’s power consists of self-giving, that God sets us free by love. Take that truth and buckle it around your waist, holding you together.

Next we put on the breastplate of righteousness, but again do not be deceived by the devil! Remember my sermons on the Beatitudes? Righteousness is not about how good and holy I am. Righteousness means being right with God and with one another. If we see other people as our enemies, then we have no righteousness in us. But if we are right with God and with one another, then this will protect us. The breastplate protects your heart, your internal organs, all those bits you need in order to live. That’s what is protected when we are right with God and one another.

Next come the shoes. I like how the NRSV puts it. “Put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.” The NIV says, “The readiness that comes from the gospel of peace,” which is a bit more obscure. So I’m going with “Whatever will make you ready,” because it implies that it may be different things for different people. I’m a pacifist, but not everyone is. Paul here is saying you don’t have to be a pacifist. Put on whatever makes you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. Paul is flexible! He recognizes that we will proclaim it in different ways. And maybe when it comes to peace, we really do need to be ready in as many ways as possible, because no one tactic will cover every contingency. That’s nice, isn’t it? Because what is the gospel of peace? It is the good news that Christ has come not to condemn but to save (John 3:17), that in Christ God is at work reconciling with all the world. God is our peace. Shouldn’t we proclaim that in as many ways as we possibly can?

Next Paul talks about the shield of faith. All too often people take “faith” to mean particular beliefs, like doctrines. But the word Paul uses means “to trust,” to have faith in, to be confident in. The shield of faith will enable us to quench the flaming arrows of the evil one. You see, Satan is the deceiver, a liar and the father of lies. The satanic power will try to trick us into believing that we are right, that we have enemies who must be slain, any of a host of lies contrary to God’s gospel of peace. But our shield of faith, our trust in God’s goodness and love, that is what will quench those deceptive, satanic lies.

Next comes the helmet of salvation. The helmet protects the head, prevents brain damage, in which we lose proper perception and thinking and reasoning. Perhaps this is a reminder that we have been saved, our brain power preserved and healed not by our own power, but by God. If we are right in the head, it is all God’s doing. And if others are wrong in the head, it is God who will save them, not us. So let us not trust in our own power, but in God’s, and remember that all alike are in need of salvation.

Last comes the sword of the Spirit which as Paul says is the word of God. We call the Bible the word of God. That is, it is the testimony of God’s truth. Jesus is also called the Word of God, a word not contained in books but which is alive and continually speaking to us. The word of God can also be the testimony of the Holy Spirit, and this might be closer to what Paul means here. Not only because he calls it the sword of the Spirit, but also because he goes on to exhort us to pray in the spirit at all times. I also think of that wonderful hymn, “My Faith It Is an Oaken Staff,” which contains the line, “My faith, it is a trusty sword, may falsehood find it keen.” Again, it’s a weapon used not against people but against that evil spiritual force Satan, the liar. It’s worth nothing that Satan is also called the Accuser, like a lawyer for the prosecution, and the Holy Spirit is called the advocate, the lawyer for the defense. We fight, but we do not attack. We do battle, but we do not accuse. We go to war, but we do not deceive ourselves. For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of evil.

Martin Luther, in his famous hymn, wrote this verse: “And though that world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed the truth to triumph through us. The powers of evil grim, we tremble not for them; their rage we can endure, for lo, their doom is sure; one little word shall fell them.” What is that word? It is the one Jesus says over and over to his disciples when they are about to fall prey to Satan’s lies. That word is, “Peace.”