Invitation to the Table

Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you King of the Jews?"

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world."

Pilate pushed: "So, you are a king?"

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

45,000 Christian denominations worldwide have not been able to pinpoint the answer to Pilate's question. 45,000 different answers to "What is truth?"

Too often, we humans confuse truth with justification, confirmation; and that makes us the standard by which truth is measured; and "being wrong" becomes the unpardonable sin. And so we point fingers of judgement at all who disagree with us. As the "center of the universe," we humans fall short.

At this Table we celebrate the one who is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." You want to know what is truth? Look to Jesus, the one who is made known in broken bread and spilled cup.

Pastoral Prayer

God of truth and light, you call us to follow Jesus. So often, being his disciples is not easy. We need your help. We need your strength to be more faithful disciples in all we do or say. Equip us for the challenges we face as Disciples of Christ. Strengthen us to be effective witnesses and agents of your wholeness in this broken, insane world. Amen.

The Powers that Be

EPHESIANS 6:10-20 (NRSVUE) **Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power; [11]put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, [12]for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. [13]Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on the evil day and, having prevailed against everything, to stand firm. [14]Stand, therefore, and belt your waist with truth and put on the breastplate of righteousness [15]and lace up your sandals in preparation for the gospel of peace. [16]With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. [17]Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. [18]Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. [19]Pray also for me, so that when I speak a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, [20]for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.**
The Word of God for the people of God!

My favorite time of year. It's not Fall, yet; but we had a couple of cool, fall-like days this week. School is underway, football is back, marching bands are back, football is back, holidays are just around the corner. Hope springs eternal in Fayetteville. Bobby Petrino is back.

Sports talk can be overdone in church; but Paul's epistles use sports metaphors a lot: "*Do you not know that in a **race** all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.*" (I Cor 9:24) In other texts he makes reference to wrestling, boxing, gladiatorial contests, chariot races.

But in today's reading the writer grabs military metaphors to describe what it's like to be a disciple of Jesus. I really wish he hadn't done that. For some, it's a rationalization for a whole socio/political/military value system being called "Christian Nationalism."

And I was disturbed at how much the idea of fighting almost dominated the Democratic National Convention this week; how Kamala will "fight for you."

Oh, I get it. I understand. I just hate that we've come to this place. But here we are; and the writer of Ephesians says be ready; so, let's go with that.

As a Marine NCO, I learned a "7-point Combat Order." I'm sure it's been modified since 1968; but it began with knowing your enemy—who is your enemy? What are his strengths? His vulnerabilities?

That's where our Ephesians text begins: **"…stand against the wiles of the devil, for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."**

While there are dangers in using "Satan language," there also are values, one of which is to keep us from identifying our fellow humans as the ultimate enemy.

Cosmic powers… Spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places…

In Jesus' day that kind of thinking wasn't dominant. Jewish theologians talked about God—high in the heavens. Between God and us were spirits taking care of things. Some of them rebelled and came to be known as evil spirits—demons.

And they came to live in people: twisted bodies, distorted minds, curved spines, blind eyes, drooling chins, speechless throats. Forces hostile to the love and work of God: twisting, distorting, disrupting, dividing, hurting.

There *was some* of that where Jesus lived; but it wasn't dominant. Jewish culture was monotheistic, and all through history, wherever you find monotheism, you don't find a well-developed system of magic, superstition, demons and spirits.

If you want a well-developed system, move into the world of Paul, out from under the protective canopy of monotheism where fears and superstitions ran amok without check or restraint. Demons and spirits were just a normal part of life.

Hans Jonas describes life in that environment like a small child, blindfolded, placed in the middle of the busiest intersection in Chicago at rush hour. Take off the blindfold, and he's all alone; helpless, terrorized by the whizzing, thundering power all around him. That was life in Paul's world. The obsession controlling the minds of people was how to escape evil today. It was all around: over, under...

That's why Paul couldn't preach—COULD NOT PREACH—a Christ that was held "in the heart." "Christ in my heart;" that's nice; but what about all this other—in the air, all around, under the earth? The Christ Paul preached had to be a cosmic Christ—ruler of things visible and invisible: ***"We wrestle, not against flesh and blood..."***

Our enemy is not human. It is the ruler of this present darkness in which one human justifies hating another human because he's a liberal or she's a conservative. Our enemy is the cosmic power that justifies one human berating another human because he's gay or she's transexual. Our enemy is the forces of evil under whose control one human has no remorse about mocking another human who is differently abled. Our enemy is the wiles of the devil that dupe one human into thinking it's OK to groom and traffic another human's sexuality for profit.

Our enemy is every evil personification of authority by which one people presume to condemn another people who are in the same army, fighting the same enemy, but who polish their armor and sharpen their swords in a different way.

In Vietnam, there was an enemy—sometimes hard to identify—but still a known enemy. When we were on patrol, there was another concern: Friendly Fire. It's estimated that roughly 1/3 of American deaths in Vietnam were from friendly

fire—most of it accidental or from incompetence or carelessness—the chaos of war, some was from drug abuse (which was rampant in Vietnam), some was intentional.

For Christians today, **"…the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, and the spiritual forces of evil"** too often include friendly fire: Christians taking pot shots at other Christians over who's doctrine is right—who can we condemn today? And Christians fight each other rather than the cosmic powers and spiritual forces of evil.

And so, we put on the whole armor of God to protect ourselves from the wiles of the devil. A couple of observations about the armor: first, every piece of armor is meant for defense. Belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, and helmet all are for protection against the onslaught of an enemy—to "quench their flaming arrows." Even the sword is not an offensive weapon. It's a relatively common biblical metaphor for discernment: ***"Indeed, the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*** (HEBREWS 4:12)

The implication is that the task of the believers is to defend themselves and their faith, not to fight against the enemies of God. Leave the fighting to God.

This whole passage comes at the end of a long section of ethical instructions: how to live in harmony and behave in such a way that the world sees Christ in the life of the church. Then comes the transition: ***"Finally, be strong in the Lord…"***

The verb is in passive voice: "be strengthened." It is present imperfect tense, indicating incomplete action in process: "Keep on being strengthened…" And the sentence ends with two qualifying prepositional phrases: "Keep on being strengthened in the Lord and in the strength of his power."

Some of the greatest travesties of human experience have come when persons or groups try to "go it alone." Depending on our own strength and assuming that our own understanding is bullet proof is, at best, risky, and at worst, arrogant.

It's one thing to build muscle and discipline the body so it performs with athleticism. It's one thing to sharpen your sword, to stockpile more bombs and drones than a military enemy. But when the enemy is **"…the cosmic powers of this present darkness, and the spiritual forces of evil,"** the strength we need is a totally different kind of strength that comes only from God.

There are more than 45,000 Chrisitan denominations worldwide, and we all believe in the validity of our faith. But, rather than mount the offensive and assert the primacy of our way, the best we can do is to cloth ourselves in truth and righteousness and faith and peace and salvation, and with lives justified with the Word of God, live so that the world sees Christ in us, and "Keep on being strengthened in the Lord and in the strength of his power."