

July 21 sermon – The Principalities and Powers

We in this country have drawn a hard line between the right and the left on virtually every issue imaginable. It's to the point where I feel like for anything that happens, I could write the whole script for the Facebook argument, both sides, complete with inflammatory memes and out of context or misconstrued historical facts.

There's a left view for everything and a right view for everything...sometimes they don't even have to be coherent, they just have to follow the line.

Left way...right way...is there a third way? Yes. Now, I did learn there's actually an organization called the Third Way...in politics, the third way is apparently a way of moderation and compromise.

That is not what I'm talking about. I believe we are in a war against a demon right now...and when you battle the demonic, there is no place for moderation and compromise.

Instead, there needs to be a radical third way. But first let's name the demon. Before Jesus cast out the demons in the Gerasene man, he commanded them to name themselves...naming a demon is the first part of the battle.

The demon we are fighting gets black people killed. The demon we are fighting gets police officers killed.

It hurts families and neighborhoods.

It deprives people of color of the abundant life Jesus wants for all of us...it deprives them of the full use of their gifts and potential.

The demon deprives our whole society of that abundant life, because we can't truly experience that until all do.

The demon's name is white supremacy. I'm going to use that name rather than racism. What we are dealing with is a pervasive demon that whispers to all of us that non-white people are just a bit lesser than white.

Now, if you've already started going down your left or right lane, just stop. This is too important. We are the church and working against the demonic is what we're called to do. Politics can be part of the answer, but we've got to go much deeper.

So, when we talk about demons, what are we talking about?

First, hear this – I am not talking about specific people or groups of people being demonic. We are all created good, we are all fallen, and we are all being redeemed by Jesus Christ.

We are mistaken when we place the demonic somewhere outside ourselves. And yet the demonic also goes beyond us as individuals.

Walter Wink is a theologian who has contributed a great deal to my understanding of the demonic in a way that works in our 21st Century world.

He begins with what Paul talked about in our reading from Ephesians...the cosmic and spiritual powers of evil...sometimes he calls them the principalities and powers.

The principalities and powers of Paul's letters were understood as the powers that oppose God. The ancient people literally believed that the principalities and powers were up in the heavens, working against God's will.

That heavenly battle was reflected in what happened on earth. When God's people were being persecuted and oppressed on earth, the powers in the heavens were at least temporarily winning against God.

It's an incredibly helpful image. But if we put the demonic off somewhere in heaven, then we have shifted all the blame and take no responsibility. Instead, the demonic is among us.

An illustration from Wink's book helped me. It's a quote from John Steinbeck's book, *The Grapes of Wrath*. *The Grapes of Wrath* tells the story of poor tenant farmers who are evicted from their farms during the Great Depression.

This quote describes the banks as a monster...a monster that feeds on profit. The insatiable need for profit led to foreclosures on the owners and forced the eviction of the tenant farmers.

So here's the quote: It begins with the owner saying this to his tenant, "We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man."

The farmer responds, "Yes, but the bank is only made of men."

"No, you're wrong there. Quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it."

Every organization or institution has an outer structure and an inner spirit. Although the institution is made up of people, that spirit is something beyond, or deeper than the individuals who make it up.

Sometimes the word ethos is used...the company ethos...or national ethos.

But I like spirituality because...well that's what we're about.

And sometimes that inner spirituality gets infiltrated by the demonic. When that happens, the institution takes on the role of the principalities and powers Paul wrote about...the spiritual forces that oppose God.

White supremacy is a demon that has infiltrated nearly every aspect of our society. If you listen to the stories of ordinary black people, you'll hear it...it's in schools, businesses, government entities, the justice system, health care.

White supremacy is a demon born in the slave trade of 17th Century America. The demon was put down for awhile after the Civil War and during the first several years of reconstruction.

It roared back to life in the Jim Crow laws of the late 19th Century and over half of the 20th. A great battle in the late 50's and early 60's handed the demon a defeat in the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights of 1964 and 1965.

Ever since then, it has waged for the most part a stealthier battle. A battle played out in city streets, schools, businesses, the legal system, and prisons.

And the thing is probably most everyone who works in or runs any of those entities will say they are not racist and certainly not white supremacists. And overtly, they probably aren't.

But still too many of the decisions made along the way keep feeding and growing the demon. The demon is at the same time within us and also beyond us.

The outer structures of our institutions...some of the policies, both written and unwritten, will need to change.

As Christians, we can participate in policy change in a variety of ways. We can listen to how God might call us to help change the outer structure.

But the inner spirituality needs changed as well.

We as the church are uniquely called to battle the inner demonic spirit...the spiritual forces of evil...the principalities and powers. Spiritual warfare isn't something you hear Lutheran preachers talk much about. But I think it's what we need now.

There are several tools for spiritual warfare. The first is naming the demon, like we did at the beginning.

Another is education... learning to recognize when and how it works.

Non-violent resistance is another – that is likely what Jesus was talking about in the sermon on the mount when he said, when someone strikes you, turn the other cheek.

Another tool is calling the demon out...speaking up when you see it in action.

But as people of faith, our most unique tool for that battle is prayer. And to believe that our prayers actually work to hold the demon back so God can work.

This spiritual warfare is our third way. It's a way of praying and believing a new future into being.

The Walter Wink book I have was published in 1992. He used the end of the Cold War as an example.

For decades after World War II, churches and faith based activist groups prayed for an end to the frightening acceleration of the nuclear arms race between the US and the Soviet Union. They also protested and wrote letters, and practiced non-violent resistance. But above all they prayed.

If you were alive in the late 80's, you might remember that what happened to end the Cold War was a total surprise. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev began a series of policy reforms, he and Ronald Reagan signed an arms reduction treaty, and ultimately the Soviet Union, the boogeyman of my entire childhood and early adult years, dissolved. Nobody predicted that.

Walter Wink believed, and I do too, that the power of prayer brought that about in a way that nobody expected...almost miraculously.

I believe that what we are seeing now is God breaking through to end white supremacy. God has no doubt been working to do that all along.

But the spiritual forces of evil are strong...they do not make God's work easy. Our prayers give God an opening to do the work. And our prayers open us to more concrete ways we might be called to work as well.

White supremacy is in a desperate battle to defeat God and keep all of us bound.

This is a time for us to be praying like crazy. There is no left or right about that. The third way unites us in a battle against a common enemy.

But the demon will shriek as it's called out. The demon will try to tell us white supremacy only exists in a few fringe groups.

The demon will tell us it's silly to make such a fuss over symbols...because the demon knows that symbols have great power.

The demon will distract us with oversimplified political statements and misconstrued history.

The demon will pit black and brown people against law enforcement officers and vice versa.

The demon will pit left against right and right against left.

But the demon will not win. We know that, because, you see, the demons on a hill outside Jerusalem were pretty sure they killed Jesus for good and all. But you know how that story goes.

Jesus is in the resurrection business. The death we're going through right now is painful, but resurrection will come. The ultimate promise is a new creation, a new community, a true community...the beloved community Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about.

And in that new community, there will truly be abundant life for all. Now is the time for us to pray and to believe that new community into being.