

ENEMIES

Sermon For Pentecost 12, Proper 16B—Eph 6:10-20

LPC, 8/23/09

Do you have enemies? Personally, I am hard-pressed to identify any enemies in my life. There have been people who have opposed me in a given endeavor. There have been people whose actions I deplored. There have been people who tore into me from a place of their own anger, but my reaction on these occasions has usually been bewilderment rather than enmity.

In my tender years it was firmly impressed upon me that I must live my life in such a way that I inspire no one to be my enemy. It was further impressed upon me that I should regard no one as my enemy. And so I have not.

I suppose it would be different if I had ever encountered anyone whose clear purpose was to harm me or my family. I know it must be different for people who have been in combat, or trained for it. I know it is different for people who have been repeatedly thwarted by the same person or group of people, especially when this happens for no good reason.

However, I suspect most of us do not have enemies as the Bible describes enemies. A surprisingly large portion of the Bible has been written by and about people with enemies. The people of Israel were enemies of Egypt, and, later, enemies of all the peoples who stood between them and the Promised Land. King David had enemies all his life: first the Philistines, and then factions within his own family. The prophets faced opponents who had them tortured and humiliated. Jesus struggled against the scribes and Pharisees, who sought to bring him down, and eventually did. The early church was up against the almighty Roman Empire, which persecuted them for the first three centuries of their existence.

Thus, a good part of the imagery in the Bible references battle and armed struggle. Do we write these parts off as situational and irrelevant for those of us who grow up in peace time and play nicely with others? Or are there enemies we don't like to name or even acknowledge?

The Letter to the Ephesians was written at a time when persecution was sporadic and much milder than it would later become. But I think we can infer that things were occasionally quite uncomfortable for Ephesian Christians. They weren't yet being dragged off to the lions, but they knew that the Christian Church had enemies in their very midst.

The letter-writer encourages them to stand fast with a vivid picture of a soldier, armed in the manner of the Romans in "the whole armor of God:" with belt, breastplate, protective footwear, shield, helmet and sword. "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power," he says. What brave and inspiring words!

Of course, the letter-writer is not talking about physical armor, but the interesting part is that he makes clear he's not talking about physical enemies either. "Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh," he says, "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."

The writer of this letter sees the church's greatest threat as being the forces of darkness rather than flesh-and-blood enemies. This may seem quaint to us modern readers. In this day and age we tend not to think of Satan and his imps hiding in every corner to turn human effort to evil. But think about it: are there not dark forces among us?

I am the last person to encourage superstition and paranoia. There is already way too much of that in popular American Christianity. I appeal however to traditional orthodox Christian thought. Christian contemplatives, particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition, speak of something called the False Self. Father Thomas Keating, author of *Open Mind, Open Heart* and many other books, defines the False Self as "the self developed in our own likeness rather than in the likeness of God; the self-image developed to cope with the emotional trauma of early childhood, which seeks happiness in satisfying the instinctual needs ... and which bases its self worth on cultural or group identification."

Father Keating describes how the False Self arises from the search to gratify certain basic human needs, but I personally would define the False Self in terms of how it tends to operate. The False Self tends to exert force on the personality to distract it from, or impede, full relationship with God and with other people.

I can only speak for how my False Self does this. My personal False Self says to me things like, "You're not good enough." Or alternatively, "You're too good for this." Or perhaps, "Make sure you protect yourself above all other concerns." The False Self makes me hate myself.

What a comfort to imagine that the armor of God is available to me as I face this intractable, internal enemy. This armor is available to us all, to face what enemies we may have: to face down whatever would separate us from the love of God.

In conclusion, and to inspire us all with the knowledge of God's protection in the face of our enemies, internal and external, I'd like to share the prayer of someone who had external enemies. In the back of the current *Forward Day by Day* there are some prayers which first appeared in *Forward Day by Day* during World War II. Here is one:

O God, you know that my country has called me away from my home and work to serve your people in danger. I believe you are with me. I do not ask to escape from duty, hardship, or danger. I ask for strength to keep pure, courage to face the unknown, and patience to bear with what is dull and hard. Bless and protect the home I have left behind. Keep my people from worrying about me, and return me to them, if it be thy will. *Amen.* (1942)