

Praising the Devil?

May these words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight,
O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

“For we wrestle *not* against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.....” Saint Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians

As I try to unpack the meaning of those words in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, I am reminded of a very humorous scene in the 1990 movie “Ghost,” a scene in which Whoopi Goldberg is struggling to tell Demi Moore’s character, Molly, that her life is in imminent peril—she hems and haws, and then says it to her bluntly: “Molly, you in danger, girl!” In many ways, I see Paul attempting to say something similar in these verses, “Ephesians, you in danger, church!”

This all begs the question, what, pray tell, are these dangers—these so called powers and principalities, rulers of darkness....in high places? Christian psychologist and theologian Richard Beck describes them as “forces that are difficult to reduce to isolated moral agents. And yet because these spiritual forces have real causal effects upon human affairs, we need to reckon with them in some way.”ⁱ He goes on further to state, “that these forces are difficult to locate in any material way, and they tend to exert their moral influence within the realm of human subjective experience—[that is] our hearts, minds, and spirits.”ⁱⁱ

Now we’re getting somewhere, and that somewhere is a profound understanding that sounds a lot like a blend of sociology and theology. We are talking about forces that shape our collective existence for good, ill, and everything in between. These forces need not be mystical, simply consider the phrase “going viral.” What it means is something that gains a critical mass and replicates itself in an impersonal fashion.

In the case of the powers and principalities, the point is, as Walter Wink notes, “evil is not just personal but structural and spiritual. It is not simply a result of human actions, but the consequence of huge systems over which no individual has full control.”ⁱⁱⁱ

For those of us who work in social services, this is abundantly clear—we see it in individuals who seem trapped by accidents of birth and circumstance. Paul had the keen moral insight to grasp of these forces two thousand years ago. Today we call them –isms: racism, sexism, classism, and so on. They have far-reaching effects that

we are beginning to comprehend and articulate on many levels— with one key implication being that this perspective challenges simple explanations about the role of personal agency in explaining things like health, wealth and happiness.

In the case of health, take, for example, the relationship between race, infant mortality and low birth weight. Data about these health outcomes tells us that Black women have much greater likelihood of having infants that die or are born lower birth weights than white counterparts. But why? An easy explanation for these phenomena would be things like poverty or lack of prenatal care and education. However, and here's the really disturbing fact: even when you control for these factors, educated Black women's infants still fair worse—and if that weren't bad enough, college educated Black women's infants fared worse than lesser educated white women's infants. What could be going on here?

One theory is that the cumulative stress of being Black, dealing with racism on numerous fronts, suppresses the immune system due to increased stress hormones— known as minority stress theory. Science is beginning to show us just how pernicious the influences of the powers and principalities are.

Civil rights scholar John Powell gives us a piercing assessment of how our racial biases operate often out of sight and mind, stating:

“The unconscious is lightning-fast; the conscious is slow. So when we say we don't see race, what we're really saying is that in the 40 bits of information that we process at a conscious level, race is not significant. *We're not talking at all about what's going on with the 11 million bits of information being processed unconsciously.*

The research suggests that in this society, for virtually everyone, race is one of most salient cleavages, [and] processes.... But it's behind our back. So someone may be honest in saying “I don't see race.” *But they're not describing their unconscious.*”^{iv}

To understand fully how the powers and principalities operate, the next step is to see how the collective impact of these biases informs and undergirds our institutions—and how the institutions perpetuate these biases and ultimately conspire to create systems of marginalization in their numerous manifestations: poorer health outcomes, housing discrimination, segregation in education, joblessness, and the school to prison pipeline, to name a few. Unpacking this means that we learn how our laws and policies aid and abet the powers and principalities, and the GI bill, welfare reform, three strikes sentencing, stop and frisk are exposed as racist at their core. We see that unconscious biases of even milliseconds could make the difference between life and death for Black men.

When we start to grasp the vastness of what we're talking about, despair, depression and anger are completely understandable emotions to have. The realization that there are systems that perpetuate themselves independently of individual actors is enough to make anyone crazy.

But more than despair, depression or anger, I often talk to my friends about just feeling weary! I think about singer/songwriter George Michael's powerful lamentation "Praying for Time," where he sings mournfully:

....it's hard to love, when there's so much to hate, hanging onto to hope, when there is no hope to speak of, and the wounded skies above say it's much too late, so maybe we should all be praying for time."^v

In moments like these, the world's landscape just looks bleak, desolate, filled with shards and brokenness. Our so-called "civil society" seems not only mean spirited but filled with a spirited meanness that permeates our actions, beliefs, and laws. We see this now more than ever, when it's hunting season on Black men in our cities and towns. When women's access to reproductive health is curtailed in a regressive fervor. When corporations are afforded the rights normally conferred to human beings. And when the environment is wantonly used like a disposable plaything. Indeed, it's hard to love when there's so much to hate.

Of course, lamentation and despair have their places, and the Judeo Christian tradition honors the reality of living with the absurdities of life. We have Psalms and countless stories that take us into the depths of human suffering— stories of the Exodus, Job and Jesus, for example. But we are also invited to a place beyond despair, because while very real, despair needn't be a final destination, but rather a stop on the way to someplace else.

One thing I'm learning about remaining in despair over injustice is that it has the potential to rob me of joy and turn me into a bitter shell of a human being. Clearly, I don't want that. That's why I assert that the solutions to injustice, while multifaceted and contingent, ultimately must be grounded in the spiritual. For if there is no shared commitment to the declaration that all are beloved of God, created equal, then we are doomed.

When wrestling with these powers and principalities, I am also learning that often an artist's sensibility provides a much needed salve for the soul, and one of the best examples is poet Jack Gilbert's "Brief for the Defense," where he writes, "that to make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the devil."^{vi} I interpret his words as **DO NOT MAKE AN IDOL OUT OF INJUSTICE!**

Many of us know individuals (including ourselves) who are constantly protesting injustice and railing against the powers that be, but without something else, their work seems to turn them into joyless individuals you want to avoid, individuals who while fighting for justice become contemptuous of people in general.

For Gilbert [and the Psalmist in today's reading], that something else is delight. He says that we humans can live without many things, but we cannot live without delight. Singing (because our lives really do depend on it), praying, meditating, justice-making acts, even protesting—when we do these things with an abiding sense of wonder and delight, they can change how we live in the world for the better. It is also in these acts that we develop a humility that helps us to realize that as individuals, we are but small chapters in a much bigger story of US. We learn that we can play our parts, as we must, and then let go and trust the unfolding drama to the Ultimate: the author and perfecter of our faith.

Have you ever been around a person who does the work of justice-making in the world with a sense of delight? They're not Debbie Downers! Yes, they despair at injustice, but they also find reason to be happy, for they know that there are redemptive possibilities even for the powers and principalities, and that grace abounds; they do not demonize and scapegoat, for they are grounded in grace and gratitude.

Christianity, at its absolute best, offers the world something inspired and brilliantly subversive—the vision of a God who is utterly vulnerable and who suffers with us even unto death. We have had millennia of seeing the powers and principalities and their effects: world wars, purges, genocides, and a whole host of social ills. But, alternatively, what Christianity intimates is God's power as a weak force—and in psychics, the weak force turns out to be one of the strongest!

With this in mind, I invite you to listen with your heart, as John Brock encouraged us several weeks ago in his sermon. Listen to these words from Richard Beck that give us a breathtaking vision of God's and our weak work in the world. Take heart and know that even in the face of the powers and principalities:

“.....there is a force who is loving, non-coercive, non-rivalrous, non-competitive, and non-violent....ever vulnerable to the dark tides of life. Consequently, this loving, creative force is fragile, episodic and transient.

But this force is always present, always working, always inserting itself, always interrupting, always haunting, always calling, always healing, always whispering, always

nourishing, always mending, always enchanting, always singing, always knitting, always soothing, always caressing, always weeping, always laughing, always composing, always painting, always nursing, always creating. ^{“vii}

Sisters and brothers, these words make my heart smile, and I hope they do the same for yours—for I cannot help but be reminded that what Beck is describing is something that we here at Hope Central call our journey toward the heart of God—it’s our journey Home. And that’s a wonderful, wonderful thing.

Amen

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- ⁱ Beck, Richard. *The Slavery of Death*. Cascade Books: Eugene, OR. 2014. p. 22.
- ⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Wink, Walter. *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium*. Galilee: New York. 1998. p. 31.
- ^{iv} powell, john. To Berkeley civil-rights scholar, race is uppercase concern.
<http://newscenter.berkeley.edu/2012/12/11/john-powell-profile/>
- ^v Michael, George. *Praying for Time*. 1990. Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.
- ^{vi} Gilbert, Jack. *A Brief for the Defense*. Refusing Heaven. Knopf: New York. 2005.
- ^{vii} Beck, Richard. Hebel, Grace and the Art of Andy Goldsworthy: Part 3: Spirit of God.
http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2014/07/hebel-grace-and-art-of-andy-goldsworthy_16.html