

**“The Power to Resist Evil”  
I Kings 21:1-21**

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In the movie, “Oh, God,” Bobby Shelton sells his soul to the devil in hopes of becoming a rock star. When the wages of his deal prove to be more costly than imagined, Bobby jumps from the back of a limousine and runs start into a church seeking some help. Unfortunately, the help he was offered was less than satisfactory. So Bobby escapes to the desert of Las Vegas where he comes face to face with God in the person of George Burns. The rest, as they say, is comedy.

I want to talk with you today for a few moments about the power to resist evil. The membership and baptismal vows of our Church put it this way, “On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you, do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, do you reject the powers of evil, and do you repent of your sins?” When talking to Jr. High students, I call this the Star Wars question. When talking with young parents who are presenting their children for baptism, I sense that they’ve already encountered the spiritual forces of wickedness by simply trying to get their kids awake and dressed and to the church on time.

Evil. The word in English is *live* spelled backwards. Evil is that force residing both inside of us and outside of us that seeks to knock the life right out of us. Evil kills the body, destroys the mind, numbs the soul. For that reason we need to renounce it and reject it and resist it by the power available to us in the person of the Holy Spirit. Today, I’d like to suggest some ways to begin.

Let us be real with ourselves. By real, I mean authentic, honest, transparent, genuine, and pure. One of my favorite children’s stories is entitled, “Velveteen Rabbit. It’s the story about animals in the nursery who talk when the children have gone to sleep. One night Rabbit asks Skin Horse, “What is real? Does it mean having all those things that buzz inside of you?” “Real isn’t how you’re made,” replied Skin Horse. “Real is something that happens to you when children love you; not just play with you, but really, really love you,

then you become real.” “Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit. “Sometimes,” says Skin Horse, “but when you’re real, you don’t even mind being hurt.”

On this Father’s Day, I want to say to fathers particularly, the best thing you can possibly do for your children is to be real. Realness in a spiritual sense is not a state achieved, it is a gift received. It is inviting God to love us, Christ to cleanse us, and the Holy Spirit to fill us until we are pure and whole.

I think it’s time for us to reassess our understanding of human nature. Everything is not ok, as humanism has taught us to believe. If I’m ok and you’re ok and everybody’s ok, then who is causing all the problems in the world?

Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer, said it so well. “If only it were all so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them, it would be easy. But the dividing line between good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being and who is willing to destroy his own heart?”

The old poet put it this way, “Within my earthly temple, there’s a crowd. One his humble, one is proud. One is sorry for his sins, the other unrepentant, sits and grins. From much corroding care, I would be free, if I could determine which is really me.”

Fosdick used to say I have me on my hands and the real struggle of life is to help I get along with me so there is a union inside the soul.

In a Peanuts cartoon, Charlie Brown asks Lucy, “What would be the best way to make the world a better place?” “Start with yourself,” replied Lucy. “Give up you bad habits and evil pleasures. Then when you’re good, you will stand as a shining example to others.” Charlie Brown thinks a moment and then says, “What’s the second best way to make the world a better place?”

By the power of the Holy Spirit, just get real, folks, just get real honest with yourself. It will do you a world of good.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, let us be resistant to the evils we deplore.

I choose for our scripture lesson today the Old Testament lectionary reading. I did it partly because it came from the youth department that we never preach from the Old Testament so here it goes. It's about Ahab, the king and Jezebel, the queen, and Naboth who owned a vineyard near the king's palace and a prophet by the name of Elijah.

Ahab tries to make a deal with Naboth for his land but it's been in Naboth's family for generations. Naboth is not about to sell it, nor even to trade it. So Ahab, being the great king that he is, goes home angrily sulking in his bed, mad that he can't have his own way. But Jezebel comes to his rescue. Taking matters in her own hands, she forges a few letters, starts a few rumors, and before you know it, Naboth is stoned to death outside the city. All is well in the king's palace, almost anyway. You see, there lived in the land a prophet named Elijah and the Word of the Lord came to Elijah and said, "You must go confront the king and say, 'You sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord.'"

Now I read those stories again and again--the major and minor Prophets of the Old Testament--and I wonder in my own soul, where are the prophets today? Especially in mainline traditions, where are the prophets? Who is standing in the courtyards of America saying, "This is the way of the Lord," not for political maneuvering but for righteousness sake. It seems to me we've gotten used to some things in America that are not very good things to get used too. We've sacrificed our children on the altar of materialism to the point that they have everything they want but fail to receive the love they really need.

A recent survey I read said, "The three things fathers most often say to their children is, 'I'm too tired,' 'We don't have enough money,' and 'Keep quiet.' None of you would ever say that, I know. I say to you today, let your children hear another voice. Let them hear from you, "I'm your father and you are my beloved son (or daughter) and on you my favor rests. I love you with a love that is unconditional and complete and will never, ever, let you go."

Sometimes I wonder, have we gotten used to some things in America that are not very good to get used too. In the name of freedom, have we allowed the music and movie industry to reduce our values to a point that women are nothing more than objects of desire and violence a right of expression? When it comes to abuse in the home and harassment in the workplace and bullies in school, can we continue to be silent? Is it right for the gap between rich and poor to

widen and widen in the most prosperous nation in the world? Do we really think in Tennessee we can gamble our way into a balanced budget? I know, I'm meddling now.

William Wilberforce was well known 200 years ago as the "shrimp who ended slavery in England." Born in 1739 to a wealthy family, William became active in politics. Then in 1784, he found the Lord under the preaching of John Wesley. At first, he thought he would leave the political arena and become a minister but God had better ideas for him. IN 1787, Wilberforce wrote, "God has set before me two great ideals. The suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of the morals of England." It took him another 46 years to see his mission accomplished. But on July 26, 1833, Parliament passed the necessary legislation to fulfill his mission. The House cheered but Wilberforce cried and three days later, he died. He gave his life for a world to be redeemed. This brings me to a statement on which I've tried to live my life. It goes something like this, "If you don't stand for something, you'll likely fall for anything." Morality is not a matter of public opinion but personal devotion to the common good. Had Jesus followed the road of least resistance in the wilderness, He would have taken the bread, claimed the fame, assumed power, and flung the purpose of His high calling to the wind. Instead, as we have heard today in the gospel lesson, in face to face combat with the evil one, he claims the sure and certain promise that humans do not live by bread alone, nor worship success alone, nor ever stand before the tempter alone. The power of the Holy Spirit is present.

It's time for people to take a stand for what is right by the power of the Holy Spirit. It's time to be redemptive in the world. It's time to overcome evil with good. Don't reduce yourself to playing the same ethical game as the enemy — it's a loser's game. Paul was quite clear, "Do not be overcome with evil but overcome evil with good."

Last Monday morning, the people of the United States put Timothy McVeigh to death by means of lethal injection. The calm, clean, antiseptic, orderly means of his execution stood in sharp contrast to the violent, screaming, chaos he caused on April 19, 1995 when he bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City that killed 168 men, women and children. If anybody ever deserved to die for his crimes, Timothy McVeigh did. Unrepentant, non-religious, he left this world affirming himself to be the master of his fate, the captain of his soul, the martyr for his cause. Somehow the execution of Mr. McVeigh was

supposed to bring closure to this national tragedy. It was supposed to be a redemptive act, a healing gesture to those who have suffered the most. I ask you today, was it? Did the capital punishment fulfill its purpose or did something else happen? Did we give Timothy McVeigh exactly what he wanted? Did we, free of charge, give him a public arena to promote his cause of injustice and hate for the world? I suspect we did.

We're called to fight evil but let us not be fooled; we are not called to fight with the same weapons as the enemy. Paul put it in military terms in Ephesians, chapter 6: "Put on the whole armor of God." Do you remember the nature of the armor? Some of you learned it in Sunday school. Put on the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness. Put on the shoes of the gospel of peace. Put on the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit. Remember you're not fighting against flesh and blood. This is no little skirmish you're in here--you're in a war with the principalities and powers of the universe so you'd better be ready to fight with spiritual weapons.

Let us not be overcome with evil but overcome evil with good. That's how we fight the battle. We neutralize its acid, serve as a charcoal filter for its smog and suck it up. Put it into a straight jacket and give it to God. Is not this the example of our Lord? He could have called ten thousand angels, stormed the world and set it free. Instead, he died alone to redeem you and me.

Revenge never redeems. Redemption comes from another side. It's full of grace and mercy and truth and righteousness and peace. Revenge is losers game. It's true with your hates as well as mine. By the power of the Holy Spirit, step up to a higher way of dealing with your enemies than simply trying to get even. There is a better way.

So I come back to where I started. Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil and injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? It is the core vow of membership in a United Methodist Church. I hope you do. Amen.

