

*Sermon for Proper 8, Year A*  
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Each of us is a seething mass of vice. Vice is a settled disposition to do what is wrong, bad, and sinful. In other words, it's a fancy way to say that we are full of badness. There are a couple of ways that I know we are all bad. First, God tells us so in the Bible. Second, I've observed a lot of people in my life, and my observation seems to corroborate the biblical evidence. (If one needs corroboration for such a source.) Finally, and most importantly, I know myself fairly intimately. And what I see inside myself convinces me that the little bit of badness I observe outwardly in everyone I meet really is just the tip of the iceberg. Most of us want people to think that we're good, so we don't let our badness show. But it's there, just below the surface, ready to destroy anything that's calmly traveling over the surface.

I don't think there is an hour of my life that I don't experience some sort of pride, envy, anger, laziness, lust, greed, or gluttony. And because of all the reasons I've listed, I don't think you all are any better off. It's not really ever a question of whether we are good or bad. It's really a question of what we should do about the vice that is boiling around in us all the time.

Now compare us to God. *He* is perfect. *He* is sinless. It is his holiness against which we transgress. And he is our creator, who can unmake us in an instant should he choose to do so. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the "Lord of hosts", the God who is at the head of armies, prepared for battle. And he "has a day against all that is proud and lofty". The Jews of Isaiah's day were in the habit of thinking the "day of the Lord" would be a good day for them. But Isaiah tells them that they will run in terror from the presence of God, and they will hide in caves and even try to burrow into the ground to avoid his glory. "Enter into the rock, and hide in the dust from before the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of his majesty."

That's the bad news. Here's the good news: The Lord of hosts, the God who insists on humbling the haughtiness and pride of man, himself became man. He humbled *himself* to death and made a way for us to follow him. When we are baptized, says St. Paul, we are buried with Christ Jesus in death and raised with him to life. "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin."

But then St. Paul says, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” This puts the whole passage in perspective. It is not as though Christ’s death automatically makes our sin go away. There is still something that we have to *do*. And that’s why St. Paul is telling us all this. He’s giving us the vision that we need to hold before us, in order to remain faithful. Remember that you have died, and dead men cannot sin.

And so Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Certainly, following Jesus will give us *his* peace, which surpasses our understanding, but it will not bring peace *on earth*. Here we have combat.

We have all been slaves in the service of sin. But Jesus now gives us the weapons to fight against sin. He has enabled us to change our allegiance. We no longer belong to sin. We belong to God. And he will hold us up. But our rescuer and Lord now requires that we turn and fight.

It should not come as a surprise that “a man’s foes will be those of his own household.” We have already seen that the fight is against sin itself. And we find that even in ourselves. Why should we not find it in our relations? Those of us who have families in which God is honored should constantly thank God for placing us in those families. It is one of the greatest gifts he can bestow.

But even those of us with Godly families have friends and distant relatives who are in rebellion against God. And you cannot truly love them at all, unless you love God more. To love anyone more than God is to make oneself incapable of love at all. There can be no comparison here. Either you love God above all else, or what you call love is only a complicated form of hatred. Either you try to obey God in all things, or the battle is already lost.

This world is a field of combat, in which we must fight even ourselves to remain faithful to God. Jesus insists that we must each take up our own cross and follow him. In the Roman Empire, the person to be crucified would be forced to carry his own cross to the place of execution. In the same way, we must carry with us the instrument of our own death. We must lose our selves for the sake of Jesus in order to find ourselves whole and healthy and cleansed from sin.

The church has always understood that this is its task. In the beginning, following Jesus into death was a literal possibility. Christians came to peace with their own death. They embraced it, if it meant that they would be able to join themselves to Jesus’ suffering. They revered the martyrs, those who had conquered sin and death with Jesus by witnessing in their own blood to the power of *his* blood.

Later, when Christians was no longer persecuted, many were baptized who had no intention of carrying their cross in the path of Jesus. Some who did fled from the laxity of regular society, because they understood that this world is a battlefield. They retreated to hermitages and monasteries to carry on the battle against their own sin and to pray for the rest of the church, ensnared as much of it was in the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

But the ones who retreated to the desert weren't the only ones called into battle. The whole church in this world is the church militant. Sometimes, we are called to fight evils outside of us. But always we are called to fight against the evil inside of ourselves. Every thought, every emotion, every impulse that might lead us to disobey our Lord must be captured at the door of the heart and put on a very short leash. Every temptation from others must be confronted and vanquished with the love of God. Every relationship we have must be put under our obedience to Jesus in order to flourish.

If we are willing to humble ourselves in this way now, then we will be able to stand and greet our Lord with joy when he comes. If we will not humble ourselves now, then we will end up scrabbling in the dust in our terror at the coming of the Lord of hosts.