

The People of the Lie
St. Columba, SC
Aug. 23, 201
Year B (Ephesians 6:10-20)

Reading the conclusion of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, I found Paul's description of putting on the whole armor of God to combat evil disturbing, not just because of the military metaphor, but also because evil can masquerade beneath the very qualities he extols. Evil often takes the form of beauty; Lucifer was one of God's most beloved, most beautiful angels before he rebelled and led the forces of darkness. For the true of heart, Paul's description of the spiritual armor of God is idealistic and comforting; for someone whose heart is evil, such armor provides a protective shield. It is easy in the face of such 20th century despots as Hitler or Stalin, or Ceaucescu of Rumania, Assad of Syria, Hussein of Iraq, or the governments of several Latin American countries, to recognize evil, but even these men surrounded themselves with all the official legitimacy of the state: Hitler, it must be remembered, was elected to power democratically. Then there is the appeal of seemingly righteous people, cult leaders, who use the Bible and the language of religion to justify and brainwash innocent followers into the ways of darkness and death. If a religious path leads to death, it is not of God. I think too of some televangelists, who under the guise of righteousness and salvation dupe naïve people out of their money and lead lives of wealth and ostentation. It should be easy to see through such hypocrisy, but it isn't. Ultimately, though, what is harder to recognize is the evil we encounter in our everyday lives, among the people we associate with each day. What is the Christian response to evil? How do we recognize evil in our time?

Christian psychiatrist, M. Scott Peck, best known for his book *The Road Less Travelled*, examined the nature of human evil in another of his books entitled, *People of the Lie*, his most important, most useful book. On the basis of his medical practice of twenty years, he

concludes that evil in individuals and in groups, even governments, hides itself by means of lies, often hiding behind a veneer of respectability and rational justifications. The roots of evil, Peck says, are fear and narcissism, that is, a fear of self-knowledge and an intense concern with self-image; people will go to great lengths, some pathological, to hide the truth about themselves from themselves and from others. But Peck emphasizes strongly that most evil in our society is not found in pathological and extreme cases which hit the news reports, but in common, ordinary, normal individuals. Not all lying is evil, as anyone who has carefully complimented other people on their appearance too well knows, but lies are evil's chief technique and symptom. To penetrate the web of deceit practiced by people, individually and in groups, is a complex, difficult process, because the serpent is a wily creature, intent on not being caught. Peck demonstrates that years of therapy are sometimes necessary to uncover the layers of lies in order to release the truth and set people free.

Peck notes that we can most often recognize evil people by their victims; not surprisingly he relates that children, the most vulnerable in any society, are the chief victims of evil, and the source of that evil is often found in their own parents, who in the name of love and care practice destructive behavior. Let me briefly relate one graphic example from the book: a teenage boy named Bobby was brought to Peck for psychological assessment. Bobby was not doing well in school, was depressed and uncommunicative; his teachers had noted that after Christmas Bobby's self-destructive behaviour had markedly increased. Bobby's older brother had committed suicide the previous summer, and after initial grief, Bobby had begun the school year well, but he had steadily declined as the year progressed, especially after Christmas. In an attempt to get Bobby to talk, Peck asked him what gift he had received at Christmas:

"A gun," came the laconic reply.

Bewildered, knowing that Bobby's brother had shot himself, Peck asked Bobby if he thought a gun was a rather strange gift.

"It wasn't a gun," Bobby replied. "It was *the* gun."

Bobby's parents had given him his brother's suicide weapon as a Christmas gift; Bobby had asked for a tennis racket.

When Peck challenged Bobby's parents about the suitability of such a gift, they answered with several rationalizations: that they were hard-working people without the time or money to buy expensive presents; that they were good parents, always driving Bobby to his boy scout meetings; that it was a good gun, many boys would be proud to own such a gun; that it would be a sin to waste the money they had spent on the gun in the first place; that they weren't educated like fancy doctors to think about the implications of giving a suicide weapon to their obviously depressed son. In spite of all Peck's efforts to make them see the destructiveness of their parenting, they evaded any recognition of the truth. It's a shocking example, and all of us would agree that to give a child his brother's suicide weapon as a gift is a stupid, thoughtless act, but the point is that their evil was masked by the lies they used to protect themselves from any acknowledgement, any truth, about themselves. I assure you that other examples in Peck's book are not so obvious. Other people he meets treat their loved ones in destructive, oppressive ways, all the while convinced that they are behaving out of loving, affectionate concern, offering rational, righteous reasons for their actions.

Peck's solution for "the hope of healing human evil," the subtitle of his book, is similar to what St. Paul's writes in the passage from Ephesians. Peck concludes: "It is in the struggle between good and evil that life has its meaning—and in the hope that goodness can succeed. That hope is our answer: goodness can succeed. Evil can be defeated by goodness." Peck continues, echoing the language of St. Paul's hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13, "When we

translate this, we realize what we dimly have always known: evil can be conquered only by love . . . by the grace of God, one can truly love one's enemies and a unique light then shines forth. The effect of this light varies. Some on their way toward holiness will move more swiftly by its encouragement. Others, on their way toward evil, will be moved to change their direction . . . Those who hate the light will attack it. Yet their evil actions are taken into the light and consumed. The malignant energy is wasted, contained and neutralized . . . The healing of evil—scientifically or otherwise—can be accomplished only by the love of individuals.”

St. Paul was positing in his metaphor of the armor of God the idealistic vision that M. Scott Peck upholds, that as followers of divine truth we must operate in our society by offering love as the antidote for evil, wherever and whenever we find it, in individuals and in our social institutions. We must not try to conquer evil with evil, literally to put on armor and march as if to war, for, as Peck comments, “if we attempt to deal with evil by destroying it, we will also end up destroying ourselves, spiritually if not physically.” Surely that is the chief symbolism of the Holy Cross, to respond to hate with compassion. We must try, as Jesus so often teaches, to distinguish between the outward forms of piety and the interior evil of the self-righteous. Over and over in the gospels Jesus clashes with the Pharisees who try to use religious rules to discredit him and his followers. The reference to Jews in the New Testament usually means the Jewish temple authorities. Jesus sees through their deceit and challenges and exposes their hypocrisy. Jesus pushes the spiritual dimension beyond outward observance of religious laws and rituals and places morality and spirituality on an inward plain of truth and integrity. In his long list of evils which come from the human heart, it is interesting to note that deceit is one of them. Peck would argue that deception is the chief technique and symbol of all such evil actions and attitudes.

As Christians we are the children of the light, followers of Christ who embodies the way of truth and life. To combat evil we must pursue and illuminate the truth. We must overcome the “spiritual forces of evil” with words of truth and actions of love. This ideal is the context for Paul’s metaphor of the armor of God, for he was advocating a different way of transforming society than that of the zealous armed resistance advocated by some religious groups in his day—and in our own. Christians are to approach each other and the members of the social order in an attitude of love, truth and peace. Christians are themselves to be transformed by the renewing of their minds and thereby to be active agents for the renewal of their society, to enlighten, to illuminate, to advance the common good. St. Paul’s advice, as M. Scott Peck helps us to see, is still very much relevant and needed in order to achieve peace in our time.