Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 10, 2018

Mark 3:20-35 (esp. v. 27)

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In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Our sermon text for this morning is from Mark 3: “But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house.” Thus far the text.

The strong man’s strength is obvious. It is in his legs, his arms, and his back. He is equipped for war. His goods are safe. They are not challenged or disturbed. He uses and abuses those goods—the souls of men—as he sees fit. He bends them to his own vile perversions and debauchery. He humiliates them and tortures them. He mocks them with promises of pleasure and escape (that he never delivers). He leads them down destructive paths, teaching them to become experts at lying and stealing, stroking their vanity for his amusement, laughing as they become accomplices to their own sorrow and destruction. People serve him in this kingdom as slaves and prostitutes, thinking they are masters while they lick his boots. No one can save them—and they surely cannot save themselves—for no one is as strong as he is.

But along comes the Righteous Man. The strong man tries to abuse him, too. After all, he is a man like others—he fully bears our flesh. He denies himself his divine rights and powers. And so the devil attacks him with brutal savagery. He is full of bloodlust and hatred, enraged by this Man who won’t fight back, who turns the other cheek. The devil accuses him, torments him, and ridicules him. He incites his people against him. He provokes a crowd to scream for his death. He presses the governor to deny him justice. He steals his honor, steals his clothing, and steals his life. He hoists him up on a tree for the whole world to see. And still he is unrelenting: he criticizes him, shames him, laughs at him, and derides him.

Blow after blow after blow, the strong man knows no mercy, no moderation, no compassion. He could not *corrupt* him, so he makes him bleed. He beats him with all that is in him, unleashing his full strength.

But then the Righteous Man is dead, and the strong man is exhausted. He put all he had into the beating, the killing, his perfect chance to pulverize the God who had rejected him. Now the Righteous Man is dead. But the strong man’s strength has been spent. He can no longer lift his arms. He poured out all his strength through his hatred. He collapses spent upon the bloody corpse. The dust settles. They are both dead.

But, *in death*, the Righteous Man reveals his strength. He is stronger than the strong man. He is the Resurrection and the Life. He rises again, but the strong man stays down, defeated in his seeming victory. The trap has worked. Mercy has overcome hatred. Satan’s army of men have a new leader; all who believe are released from their prison and given freedom and life.

The battle was not between the strength and power of the Almighty God and the power of the devil. That would have been no battle at all, for the devil’s strength is nothing before the Creator. If that had been the case, the devil would have forevermore cried “foul” from hell. It would not have been fair. But as it is, the devil cannot complain. He had every advantage. He had his fully army. He had no rules, no obstacles to overcome. For he did not fight God in his power but the Man Jesus Christ in our flesh and weakness. Jesus denied himself and took up our cross. He withheld his strength to fully embrace our weakness. His Father forsook him. The Spirit carried him to the cross and then left him there for the strong man’s abuse. But all the devil had was the strength of his hate. Strong as he was, it was not as strong as God’s will to save—God’s love for his Son and his love for us.

Jesus did not so much *fight off* the devil as he *embraced* him. He invited all the pain, sorrow, and affliction that the devil could muster so that he would have nothing left for us. Our Lord’s only weapon was the bold confession and hope that God, his Father, would save him—that he would rise from the dead. Thus armed with his own Word and Promise, he let the devil do his worst. He took the abuse. He turned the other cheek. He held back his angelic host so that the devil could kill him. And through it all he never blamed God. He never complained. He never doubted. He faithfully received all that the Father would give him.

Today’s Gospel lesson begins with people who see Jesus’ power—they watch and listen as he casts out demons, and heals diseases, and forgives sins. They cannot deny his power, but, regardless, they want nothing to do with him. They are under the control of their father the devil. Their hearts are full of envy and rage. By their very nature, they do not want Jesus or his good works. *This* is where we ought to see ourselves in the story. This is who we all once were.

Fallen people call what is good “evil.” God makes them weak in their body or mind, and rather than using their weakness to call upon God’s strength, they accuse him. Satan provokes them with the blasphemous question, “Did God really say… that he desires good things for you?” and they take the bait. They eat the fruit. They accuse God. “God, how could you make me like this? It’s not fair! I should be strong. I should have a better life. I should not have to put up with this suffering. I thought you were supposed to love me.”

But that is not the way of Jesus. The way of Jesus is the way of the cross. Jesus’ strength is in his weakness. He overcomes the strong one by handing himself over and nevertheless trusting God for all things.

The devil is *obviously* strong. He has great power. He is ruthless and clever. But Jesus is stronger. He is cleverer. Jesus does not use evil disguised as good; that is the way of the devil. Jesus uses good disguised as evil. His unjust death—the innocent for the guilty—becomes good. His crown of thorns, his bloody arms and legs giving out in weakness, and his dying thirst become good. The centurion’s conversion and the repentant thief become good. The death of Jesus is at once both the worst evil ever committed and the greatest good God could ever do for his people. It is the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes.

Dear friends in Christ, it is *in weakness* that Jesus shows God’s hidden strength. In injustice he shows the Lord’s pervasive justice. He relies on God to come through, and this is good. This is fitting. This is faith.

It was *by a tree* that the devil overcame the human race and plunged creation into darkness. So it is by a tree that the devil is overcome. It was *by death* that Satan sought to steal away man’s glory. So it is by the death of Jesus that the glory of man is restored. Satan is caught in his own trap; he succumbs to temptation; he is bound and defeated. The strong man is out-maneuvered by the Stronger Man whose strength is not hatred and rage, but love and mercy. The war is over. Satan is defeated. Jesus is the victor. You belong to him now. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.