

Ephesians 6:10-13

¹⁰Finally, **be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.** ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²**For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.** ¹³Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

John 6:56-69

⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. ⁶⁰When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” ⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵And he said, “For this reason I have told you **that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.**” ⁶⁶Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “**Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.**”

Serenity

There's a famous prayer that most of you may know called *The Serenity Prayer*. Do you know it? It goes like this:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

The prayer was written by Reinhold Niebuhr back in the 1930s. It's now used by Alcoholics Anonymous as well as other recovery groups, and the prayer makes three important points. The first two are obvious:

1. We have the power to change some things.
2. We don't have the power to change other things.
3. Knowing the difference leads to serenity, to peace.

Because not knowing the difference can drive you crazy. If you think that you have the ability to change something that you can't change, you live in a state of frustration. Once upon a time I thought that I could be such a great evangelist that I could persuade everyone I met to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior and get them to come to church and turn their lives around. I thought that Jesus was such an inspiration for me that once I communicated that to other people that they would raise their hands and shout "Alleluia!" But when my witnessing and my powers of persuasion failed to convince others that Christ was indeed THE way, I felt disappointed with myself, thinking "What did I do wrong or say wrong?" The fact is that I may have said and done everything RIGHT, but those people were just not interested. I learned that only GOD can truly draw a person to Jesus Christ; in our Gospel lesson Jesus says just this: **"No one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."** There's no point in getting ourselves worked up because our son or daughter or brother or sister or husband or wife are not interested in coming to church; it's not in our power to make that happen. People who think that they have the power to affect such decisions in other people can be so wracked with guilt when all their efforts fail. We have to understand that we don't have the power to change such things.

And then there are some people who *underestimate* their power to change things. These folks are often cynics, feeling that the world is just a messed-up place that will never get any better. They're often depressed, understandably so because they feel like they are helpless pawns in this big game of life, that they are being manipulated by powers beyond their control. They're the Eeyores. You remember Eeyore the donkey from Winnie the Pooh. One of his favorite words was, "Whatever." *"It's probably gonna rain."* *"It doesn't matter anyway."* Eeyore just felt that he would always get the short end of the stick, that bad things were going to happen, and he had *no ability* to change those things. If some creature took his house, he slept in the rain. If he was neglected or unappreciated, that was life. I wanted to tell Eeyore to speak up, to demand some respect, to tell people when they were stepping on him. We all have some control over what happens to us and what goes on around us, and we need to do our best to do what we can to make things better.

Our scripture passages reflect that fact that there are things we can change and things we cannot change. **Paul tells us to "be strong in the Lord" knowing that "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."** Being strong in the Lord is something we **can** do in order to "withstand that evil day" Paul writes. But evil is a spiritual force, a cosmic force that is more powerful than any one person; no individual has the power to destroy evil; that's why Paul counsels us not to *conquer* evil but to *withstand it*, to *stand firm*, to *hold your ground when it attacks us*. And evil does attack us in so many ways, from a hijacked jetliner slamming into a skyscraper to the critical coworker who leads you to doubt your own ability to do your job. We are not equipped with enough power or resources to change those who may carry out evil acts, but we can protect ourselves; we can put on the armor of God to defend ourselves against evil's onslaught, to make sure that evil does not find fertile ground in our hearts.

Jesus tells us to love our enemies, which may seem impossible; but we can actually obey this commandment *because* we understand that evil is spiritual in nature. Because evil is a spiritual force and not flesh and blood we are able to hate what is evil without hating the person who commits the evil; after all, you and I are capable of committing evil acts, which is why Jesus teaches us to pray, “deliver us from evil...lead us not into temptation.” **HE KNOWS HOW VULNERABLE AND WEAK WE ARE.** I saw a fascinating documentary about Germany’s procession into the Second World War, and the scariest truth that came out of that film was that *Adolph Hitler and the Nazi party were incredibly popular for nearly ten years.* The whole world was impressed by Adolph Hitler in the 1930s; he was Time Magazine’s Man of the Year in 1938 six months after he invaded Austria. He was loved by many Germans because he improved their standard of living and made them proud to be German (the irony of course was that he himself was Austrian). Most German citizens accepted Hitler’s scape-goating and incarcerating Jews because they were so much better off than they were before he came into power – they were drunk with their own pride. I had to ask myself, “If I was living at that time, in that country, would I have been putting my arm in the air and declaring ‘Hiel Hitler’?” Would I have closed my eyes to the genocide? We are all susceptible to the powers of evil, and very often those powers influence us slowly, subtly, deceptively – they say that the worst lies are those that come closest to the truth – the devil has a way of tricking us into thinking we’re doing a good thing when we’re doing the exact opposite. We are all vulnerable to the influence of evil which knows our every weakness.

And it’s why Jesus speaks in such bold, offensive terms regarding the need to eat his flesh and drink his blood. We need Jesus to abide in us and we need to abide in him because we don’t have what it takes to combat the evil that so often surrounds us and attacks us. It’s all good and well to agree with Jesus’ moral teachings – love God, love neighbor, love self, love your enemies, give to those in need, serve others, etc. – but how good are we at following through with ALL of those commandments ALL of the time? **NOT VERY.** We like to remind ourselves of all the good things we do, raising money for this cause or for that, recycling our garbage, sending Christmas Cards, but what are we **NOT** doing? If we think that we have the power to affect our salvation we are mistaken and *thank God for that!* Because if it really were up to us to earn the points necessary to open the gates of paradise, **ALL OF US COMBINED COULD NOT ACCUMULATE ENOUGH POINTS TO DO SO.** Thank God that we do not have the power to affect our salvation and that only Jesus Christ has that power, and all we must do is eat his body and drink his blood, to ingest him, absorb him, let him dwell within us, and let us abide in him. That doesn’t make us perfect, but it makes us belong to him. Eating the bread, drinking the cup makes Jesus a part of us and us a part of him.

There are lots of people in churches who struggle to gain some assurance of their own salvation because they still think that they have to earn it, and all of us fall so far short of the mark. We all fail when we rely on our own power. Peter expresses this truth so clearly when he declares, **“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”** We have nowhere else to go for salvation. We rely on Jesus, and he becomes our food, our peace. **IF WE EAT JESUS’ BODY, AND DRINK HIS BLOOD, IF WE MAKE HIM A PART OF US RATHER THAN APART FROM US, IF WE ALLOW CHRIST TO HAVE HIS WAY WITHIN US, WE FIND OUR SERENITY.** The

serenity comes in part from an understanding of the *doctrine* of grace – the knowledge that God loves us and forgives us – that’s the Gospel that warms our heart and makes us drunk with joy when we first comprehend it– but the serenity grows in us as we *experience* God’s grace firsthand, as we *feel* God’s love and forgiveness because we *feel* Christ, the living bread, living in us. We have a relationship with the One who abides in us, and our belief is more in the person and less in the theology.

My prayer for you this morning is that you would experience the serenity that comes from knowing that your life, your eternal life, rests in God’s hands, from serving the Lord with courage finding your strength in Him, and from knowing what you can and cannot change in this world.