

***Resisting Racism***  
**Ephesians 6:10-18**  
**Sermon by Dan Schrock**  
**August 7, 2016**

*<sup>10</sup>Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. <sup>11</sup>Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>Therefore 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. <sup>14</sup>Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. <sup>15</sup>As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup>With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup>Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. <sup>18</sup>Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. (NRSV)*

I

When I was 12 years old, my parents adopted another child. One morning in May 1971, I went to school without a brother; that same day when I came home from school, there he was, my new brother, who had been born in the Goshen hospital just 3 days before. Matthew is biracial: his biological father was African-American and his biological mother was white.

It turned out that his adoption was my first introduction to racism. Three months after he came to our family, my mother took us to the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Relief Sale. I have a distinct memory of us walking into one of the buildings at the relief sale, she a 34-year-old white woman pushing a stroller with a 3-month-old biracial baby, and I, a 12-year-old white boy, walking beside her. As we walked into building, I could see a bunch of white people staring at us. I could see their eyes narrowing, their jaws slightly shifting, their stride pausing for a fraction of a second. One white woman, just after she walked past us, turned to her white friend and asked in a moderately loud voice: “Where did that baby come from?” The question I thought I heard underneath her question was: “How many men has that white woman been sleeping with?” I glanced quickly at my mother to see what her reaction would be. She said nothing, but on her face was a look of shock and horror at what had just happened.

Later that night we talked about it at the supper table. Mom told the story to Dad, who mostly just listened, sadly. When she finished telling him the story, there was fire in her eyes. She said, "I don't care what other people think or what other people say. Matthew is my son and that's the way it is. Other people are just going to have to get used to it!"

In the years since then, my brother and his 3 African-American sons have probably experienced many examples of racism. But those stories are theirs to tell if they choose to. Even if I knew all their stories, which I'm sure I do not, they wouldn't be my stories to tell. What I can tell you is that I worry a little about their safety. On the news I watch police killing black men, and I can't help but wonder if one of the black men in my family might someday be stopped by police officers and somehow end up dead. This isn't something I toss and turn in bed about, but I do think about it.

## II

Racism is one of the most persistent problems in American society. You could argue that racism is the most persistent problem in U.S. history, stretching all the way back to the first time European explorers encountered the native peoples who were living here long before any white person showed up. Racism took a fateful turn in 1619, when Dutch traders brought the first African slaves to the colony in Jamestown, Virginia. Racism was woven into the foundations of American political life in 1776 when Thomas Jefferson, a slaveholder until the day he died, ironically wrote into the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal." Racism was enshrined into American law in 1787 when delegates to the Constitutional Convention agreed to count each black slave as three-fifths of a person. Racism caused the Civil War; and after the Civil War, racism led southern politicians to pass a flurry of laws that reasserted the power of whites over blacks. Racism led to the push and pull of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 60s. And now blatant racism has roared back into our contemporary political discourse.

The evil of racism is so deeply embedded into American society that I'm certain I too have picked up racist attitudes and perspectives. Yes, my extended family has 4 black

men whose lives matter to me, but that doesn't mean I've magically avoided being a racist. I do not want to be a racist. Yet racism in this culture is so powerful, so pervasive, so persistent, and so insidious that I have surely participated in it.

I have also benefited from white privilege. Police officers have only stopped me when I richly deserved it for speeding or running a stop light. Some years ago the turn signals on my car didn't work for about 6 months because one of the light bulbs was burned out. No police officer ever stopped me for that. Maybe I was just lucky, or maybe I was just white. I've been able to live anywhere I wanted, go anywhere I wanted, buy anything I wanted, get any loan I wanted, and say anything I wanted. I've never been denied a job because of my skin. That's white privilege—and what makes white privilege possible are the systems and structures of racism.

### III

I'm proud to belong to a congregation that struggles against racism. Some of you created Diversity Day to counteract Ku Klux Klan rallies. Some of you have written blogs and letters to the editor. Some of you have served on the Community Relations Commission. Some of you have marched peacefully. Some of you have taken anti-racism or intercultural training. Some of you have married people with a different racial-ethnic background than yours, or adopted children with a different background than yours. Many of you have resisted racism in your own quiet but significant way. Maybe it was as simple as telling someone how you feel about their racist joke or their Confederate flag.

And yet racism continues to raise its ugly head. Just when it seems that American society might be making some headway against racism, it comes roaring back in a new or more virulent form. We keep resisting, but it keeps coming at us. How do we fight something so strong? How do we stand tall? Where can we find courage and hope?

### IV

Ephesians has an answer. As nearly as we can tell, the letter of Ephesians was written in a context of racial hostility. Chapter 2 talks about a "dividing wall" of hostility

(v. 14) between two groups of people. This dividing wall was probably the mistrust and enmity between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Numerous passages in the New Testament hint that relations between Jews and Gentiles were sometimes difficult.<sup>1</sup>

The apostle Paul spent all of his Christian life resisting racism and trying to reconcile these two groups of people. It was the sociological reality that drove much of his theology and his mission strategy. Racial healing was a central passion of his life. He knew from his own experience how persistent racism is and how hard it is to resist it. Paul had the same question we have: how do you fight something so strong? In Ephesians 6, Paul proposes three answers.

His first answer is this. To persevere in the struggle against racism, we need good defensive armor. And since this is fundamentally a spiritual struggle, physical armor made out of steel and Kevlar won't do us any good. It's a spiritual struggle, so we need spiritual defenses. We need the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of peace, the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation (vv. 13-17). The soldier who resists racism will want to wear strong armor—and that armor will necessarily be spiritual.

Paul's second answer: recognize that the struggle against racism is not really a struggle against human beings. Our enemies are not made of "blood and flesh" (v. 12a). Our enemies are not human beings like David Duke, the former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, or any of the other people who belong to one of the 892 hate groups which are being monitored by the Southern Poverty Law Center.<sup>2</sup> No, our real struggle is "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (v. 12b). In this verse Paul is referring to the Powers, which are spiritual forces in the world that tangibly express themselves in systems, social structures, economics, politics, and institutions. Racism is one of these Powers. Racism is an evil spiritual energy that expresses itself in thousands of ways in our culture. This spiritual energy at the heart of racism is why it keeps coming back despite our best efforts to resist it. To fight racism, we have to get at this spiritual energy. To use an electrical image, we cannot get rid of racism at the wall outlets. To be

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<sup>1</sup> Examples include John 9:22, 12:42, 16:2; Acts 15; Romans 9-11; Galatians 2; and others.

<sup>2</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center Hate Map, <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>, accessed July 15, 2016.

effective, we have to fight it all the way back at the power station where the electrical energy is being generated.

What allows us to reach the power station where racism is generated? Intercessory prayer. This is Paul's third answer. Intercessory prayer is our main offensive weapon in the struggle against racism. Take a sword with you into the fight, says Paul in verses 17-18, but let that sword be "prayer and supplication." To resist racism we will want to keep doing the things we in this congregation have already been doing. But to get at the spiritual energy which feeds racism, we will also want to pray.

- Pray that God will fight the spiritual sources of racism.
- Pray that God will transform the lingering racism in our own hearts.
- Pray that God will break down the dividing walls of hostility among us.
- Pray that God will advance the gospel of peace.
- Pray that God, who possesses way more power than anything racism can throw at us, will do what we humans in our puny power cannot do.
- Pray that God, who began to defeat the forces of evil by raising Jesus from the dead, will now go ahead and finish the battle against evil.

The chief offensive weapon we use to resist racism is not a rock, not a revolver, and not an assault rifle. It is intercessory prayer. So let us stay alert. Let us persevere in supplication. Let us be strong, because we serve a God of strength. And let us be joyful, because God will ultimately win this fight.