

August 23, 2009 John A. Baldwin

One morning when I went out front to get our newspaper, I discovered a spider web stretched between our mailbox and a tree. Hoping to encourage the spider to hunt bugs elsewhere I removed the web. After a few days of this, when I discovered yet another beautiful web, spun overnight, it occurred to me that there was a struggle of will going on between myself and the spider. The spider possessed a will to live and triumph in the face of adversity that I couldn't help but admire.

If one takes time to be an observer of nature one becomes acutely aware of this mysterious and powerful will to live in the midst of adverse circumstances or hostile environments. Every time I go out for a walk in the woods it is present everywhere: plants growing out of rocks; ants scurrying to retrieve eggs when their nests are disturbed; the rapid recovery of underbrush in logged out areas. Closer to home, despite my best efforts to remove grass from the cracks in my driveway, I see a similar will to live in that pesky greenery that just keeps coming back.....again and again.

Human beings are also endowed with a will to live....up to a point. What complicates the picture, however, is the human spirit. The human spirit has incredible potential for creativity, achievement and depth in living. I've seen remarkable ability to triumph over great physical and psychological adversity. I remember a colleague and friend, the Rev. William Kirkpatrick who, at the age of 16, was paralyzed from the neck down by polio. He nearly lost his life, and his doctors told him he would never walk again. Yet the strength of his inner spirit, his determination to live, enabled him not only to walk again and to lead a normal adult life, but also engendered in him a compassion and sensitivity for others that was keenly sharpened by his own suffering.

I have also been inspired by the story of Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky whose life we celebrate in our yearly church calendar on October 15. He was the Bishop of Shanghai in the early 20th century who translated the Holy Scriptures into Wenli, the last 2000 pages of which he typed, after a paralyzing stroke, with the one finger which he could still move.

There are others...many, many others, whose inner spirit and will to live have enabled them to soldier on valiantly in tough times and circumstances, and to achieve triumph over adversity. Our Lord himself, hanging on the cross, beaten and mocked by his enemies was not an inwardly destroyed human being. Even in his agony, an inner compassion and forgiveness for others came forth from his lips. His death cannot be looked upon as the degradation of a human being, but as a triumph of the inner spirit.

But the human spirit is also fragile and vulnerable. It can be broken or deeply damaged. The will to live and triumph over adversity can be weakened by prolonged illness, psychological battering, or sudden calamity. A person's inner resources are sometimes inadequate to resist the buffetings of life. We find some tragically cutting their lives short through suicide, other personalities unraveling aided by alcohol or drugs, and still others

surrendering to grim resignation and loss of hope. The inner spiritual defeat of a human being, created by God in God's own image, is a tragedy of terrible proportions.

During my 30 years of active parish ministry, I've had ample occasion to observe the human spirit tested, tried, beaten and triumphant. I am convinced that it is our faith, in God, in Jesus, in our church community, and in ourselves....that makes the difference between the triumph of our inner spirit, or our resignation to defeat.

Paul in this morning's Epistle talks about the challenge of Christian living using the metaphor of a battle. He encourages the faithful at Ephesus to put on armor for the protection of our inner spirit. He includes in this arsenal of defensive weapons, the shield of faith, the breastplate of righteousness, and the helmet of salvation, with the belt of truth around our waists. Paul uses this imagery to remind us that God never leaves us defenseless in a hostile world. Although we are vulnerable to doubt, criticism, disappointment, heartbreak and betrayal, we have resources within us that can be called upon to turn us toward hope and away from despair. Paul goes on to describe the battle that the human spirit must wage throughout life as being not against primarily against human enemies, but against the far more threatening sovereignties and powers of darkness in the world. Human foes come and go, but the darkness of evil never goes away for long. Paul's emphasis is on the inner struggle of the Christian life.

Throughout our lives we are confronted by inner conflicts – the temptation to give up our ideals for pragmatic realities, to conform to the image others have of us, or to sell our souls in the hope of personal gain. We cannot control what others do to us in life – the parents we are given and how they treat ed us....the pressure of friends and peers to conform or to rebel....the hurts and slights others bestow upon us. What we do have power to affect is our search for meaning, the drive to be creative, the discovery of our own uniqueness, and our quest for God.

Jesus and Paul knew that the inner struggle is the decisive one in life – who we are, and what we become, is decided in our inner core. Paul reminds us that we have been gifted with an arsenal of spiritual gifts. Do not hesitate to put them on. When you leave your home or apartment tomorrow morning, check not only for your eyeglasses, keys, wallet and cell phone, but also for whether you've buckled on truth, put on the breastplate of integrity, taken up the shield of faith, and grasped the sword of the Spirit. If you have, you will be equipped to fend off all of the flaming arrows of evil and darkness that may assail you during the day. If you haven't, watch out.