There’s this curious sentence in the middle of our text today that sticks out to me. I wonder if you caught it. Jesus voices it to religious leaders who have come from Jerusalem to challenge him about his healings and exorcisms. They accuse him of doing Satan’s work. Jesus tells a couple of one sentence parables to show what nonsense their claims are, and then he says this:

*No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.*

Wait, Jesus is likening his saving work toburgling a strong man’s house? Bet you didn’t see that coming! This implies that his ministry is about using power to defeat the strong man by being, well, the stronger man. Kind of surprising talk from Jesus, but, hey, it is what it is.

We do it too, though. Ever hear someone end a prayer by saying, *In the strong name of Jesus?* We like our Jesus with added Siracha. There’s something in us that wants to emphasize Jesus’ strength, but I’m not at all sure we know what that means.

Are you’re familiar with *The Strongest Man* competitions? You may stumble onto one when sports-surfing ESPN, ESPN2, ESPN Classic, ESPN+ or ESPN “To Infinity and Beyond.” Crazy how sports crazy we are. Anyway, the competitors are all enormous. Names like Helmut and Sven. They lift huge tractor tires, pull tanks in a harness and flip telephone poles end to end. All for the glory of being named The Strongest Man.

That’s what we normally think strong means. Someone with the power to move heavy objects. But there’s more than one kind of strength. And when we talk about Jesus being strong, we need to get clear what we mean by that, since we tend to enlist Jesus in our competitions to help us win.

In the last half century or so, this is true of evangelical Christianity in a very American way. Historian Kristin Du Mez has written a provocative book titled
Jesus and John Wayne. She charts the history of “muscular Christianity,” which glorifies the strong male figure who does what has to be done to win in the end at any cost. I experienced a lot of this as a college football player. Du Mez says that people who are surprised today by Evangelicalism’s fascination with militarism and machoism shouldn’t be. It’s really the culmination of the longstanding imagination of Jesus being like John Wayne: a gun-slinging man’s man who does what needs to be done by whatever means to beat the bad guys. Gentle Jesus, meek-and-mild, who tells us to love our enemies and put away the sword, is nowhere to be found. Jesus is the strongest man, but in an American frontier sense of strength. He defeats his enemies by dagger, and with swagger. He makes them suffer, but he doesn’t suffer himself.

Contrast that to the hero characters of the Marvel and DC stories. Since our grandkids are getting into all this now, Kim and I started with the first one from 2011 and we are making our way through Ironman, Wonder Woman, Thor and the rest. This is what grandparents do, don’t you know?! The original is Marvel Studio’s Captain America: The First Avenger. Set during World War II, Steve Rogers is scrawny but scrappy, a physically weak and sickly wannabe who is rejected by Selective Service as 4F. His courage is noticed, however, and he is chosen to become the first super soldier by being injected with a secret serum developed by the German defector scientist Dr. Abraham Erskine.

The conversation between the doctor and Steve captures truths we need to understand in what’s happening in our text with Jesus. Steve asks, why him? Erskine replies: The serum amplifies everything that is inside. So, good becomes great. Bad becomes worse. This is why you were chosen. Because a strong man, who has known power all his life, will lose respect for that power. But a weak man knows the value of strength and knows compassion.

The doctor then says to the man who would become Captain America: You must promise me one thing. That you will stay who you are. Not a perfect soldier, but a good man.
The critical point is that goodness must drive the use of power. And compassion defines goodness, because it shows how true goodness is directed toward relieving the suffering of others, even at the cost of suffering oneself on their behalf.

The contest between the two strong men in the Captain America movie is precisely the difference between good and evil: the villain uses his strength to dominate others; the hero uses his strength to liberate others. It’s the love of strength versus the strength of love.

This is how we should think of Jesus as the strongest man. He is, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, the “man for others.”

When you look at Jesus’ ministry through this lens, you may also see something we don’t always acknowledge; namely, that there are strongholds in different spheres of life that prevent some people from flourishing. This is the arena Jesus works in, because this is where demonic power resides. It hides in laws and codes and policies and bureaucracies and customs that purport to be morally neutral and fair but, in reality, are deeply unjust and harmful.

When confronted by the defenders of the status quo about his healings and exorcizing demons, for instance, Jesus doesn’t talk about the physical or mental state of those individuals he needed to attend to. He talks about how a kingdom, or a house, cannot stand if it be divided against itself. These are corporate, not individual, entities. They signify governments and families and corporations and, dare I say, churches that have become the playgrounds of oppressors.

The strong man who needs to be tied up is the Evil One himself, who controls these systems behind the scenes by the power of Sin with a capital S. He holds that power by remaining hidden. He loses it by being exposed.

We like to think that being morally upright means treating every individual as an individual. But we have blind spots that prevent that. Jesus is saying that his work involves confronting those strongholds of embedded prejudice that dehumanize people, preventing them from being judged as individuals. And he is calling on the church to join him, which is something we are
reluctant to do.

What are these strongholds? Pretty much anything that ends with a suffix like -ism or -archy or -phobia: racism, patriarchy, xenophobia, say. When the adjective Black or woman or immigrant becomes a noun, they aren’t being treated as unique children of God; they are a category or class that limits their worth and potential.

Bureaucracies do this, too. Anyone ever suffered an insurance company deny-and-delay strategy? Or spent two hours on the phone with a so-called customer service center being told what they cannot do for you instead of what they can? These strongholds treat you like a commodity, not a person. Some strongholds are more deadly, though.

This past weekend we saw the commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre. At the same time, we learned that the Oklahoma legislature has passed a law that would make it nearly impossible to teach kids about this event as an example of systemic racism, because to do so might make white children and their parents uncomfortable.

The Black Tulsa community of Greenwood—which was known then as Black Wall Street, because Blacks were doing precisely what we say today we would want them to do in becoming self-reliant and industrious—was burned and destroyed completely. As many as 300 were killed and 10,000 left homeless in what can only be called a domestic terrorist attack, which included the first aerial bombings from the planes of the Sinclair Oil Company.

You can’t talk about this without talking about the strongholds of segregation, Jim Crow laws, racist law enforcement and media coverage that allowed it to happen and not to be talked about for a hundred years. To prevent talking about it as history today is a further example of a stronghold.

Now, here’s the thing, church: we can’t fix in the world what is still broken in us. The good news, though, is that Jesus is still at work binding the strong man, even when he speaks through someone in a pulpit. Look at the difference in the church’s response in 100 years.

The Sunday after the massacre in 1921, the bishop in Tulsa
preached in the Boston Avenue Methodist Church and said this: ... the white man who got his gun and went out in defense with it did the only thing a decent white man could have done. There is one thing upon which I would like to make myself perfectly clear. That is racial equality. There has never been and never will be such a thing. Steps toward racial equality are the worst possible thing for the Black man.

Now, here’s what the current pastor of the same church said this past week: [This] never should have happened, [it was the] bad outcome of white supremacy that had ... infected the church. So [today] we are making a contrasting statement that we are a church that wants to work for integration, wants to work for building better race relations and believes that all people are equal and should ... be treated equally under the law.²

Spiritual strongholds still exist in our world today, friends. They are where Satan hides in plain sight among us. But Jesus is the strongest man, I tell you, in just the right sense. He uses the strength of love to free and heal us all. And he will never rest until oppressed and oppressor alike—all the wounded and weary of the world—find their rest in him. Amen.

² [Link](https://oklahomawatch.org/2021/05/30/tulsa-race-massacre-prayer-room-highlights-churches-1921-sins-seeks-healing/)