

The Lucifer Effect

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

Slide: Bread of Life

Bread. If you have been here the last several weeks, the appointed readings from the Gospel of John have been about bread. Since the Sunday before Pastor Nate retired, four Sundays ago, Jesus has been talking to us about bread, specifically that he is bread. It has been four weeks. Today is week five.

You know, a lot of people don't realize that I do not choose these readings each week for our worship. These readings come to us from a Common Lectionary of readings which pretty much all Lutherans, Roman Catholics and many other Mainline Protestant churches share together; hence the words Common Lectionary. If you were to go to IC today and worship there, you would hear these same readings.

And, originally, these readings for the Church year were put together in such a

way that we get to hear the depth and breadth of the birth, life, death and ministry of Jesus, but on the other hand, the preacher has to decide how to grapple with the text for each week.

...Which brings me back to bread. I'm tapped on preaching about it, at least at this point of week five and I want to go back and ask those who put the Lectionary together: "What were you thinking in putting us through five weeks of the Bread of Life Narrative? Not that I'm complaining mind you. No, wait, I'm complaining.

Slide: Armor of God

So, I looked to the reading we have from Ephesians, generally referred to as the Armor of God passage and I found myself at an impasse. Do I preach on this concept of spiritual warfare or do I go back to bread? Ok, be bold Christine; don't stir away from a reading because it's hard. So here we go...

The reason why I struggle with this, what really is a

wonderful and hopeful message about living a Christian life up and against oppression, is because of what has been done to it, especially in the last century. If you search the internet for the words “Spiritual Warfare”, you will likely see this passage from Ephesians referenced. You will also get a variety of Wikipedia articles, Pentecostal websites, and other Charismatic sites that speak of this. And, when I thought of tackling this on Tuesday when first looking at the readings, I asked my husband Jim, “When I say the words ‘Spiritual Warfare’, what do you think?” He, said, “I think I’m uncomfortable.”

Slide: Angel battle

And, he’s not the only one. I am, too. For “Spiritual Warfare”, at least in the modern sense, is a philosophy put forward by Evangelicals twisting this hopeful passage on standing firm in faith by using it instead as a literal example that Satan and his minions are actively oppressing the ‘true’ Christians and influencing humans on earth. So, whenever Evangelical

Christians see a setback in their political agenda, in their social agenda, in their belief that they are persecuted, they see it as Satan and his demons influencing people to bring evil upon the world and ultimately to bring the antichrist. And so, if anyone should choose to disagree with them, they can easily hide behind their self-righteous protection that insulates them from all those other Christians and other non-Christians who according to them are not saved.

Slide: Lucifer (NBC TV show)

Let’s call this the Lucifer effect; the idea that somehow the devil made me do it or that the devil is causing secular forces to work against the purposes of God in the world. This idea means that Satan is the main actor in causing evil to happen in this world on a spiritual plain and we should prepare to put on the armor of God in fighting against these forces, as if human beings aren’t capable enough on their own to cause evil without the help of Lucifer.

The book that brought about this popular idea was called “This Present Darkness” from the 1980s and also an even earlier book called “War on the Saints” written in 1888 and finally published in the early 1990’s. Elements of these books also reference the book of Revelation and a piece or two of the book of Daniel, but these fictional novels have dangerously taken what the first Christians understood about Satan, Lucifer, and the Devil all out of context and plopped it right down into contemporary culture.

Slide: The Living Church

But, the writer of Ephesians was not an American or a Canadian, nor a Russian or German. He was not a Pentecostal or a person who would be thought of as anything modern in our way of thinking. The writer of Ephesians was a person who, if not the apostle Paul himself, was a follower of Paul, which means that he would be addressing a church, specifically the one in Ephesus, and a church is a corporate body, not an individual.

In our American culture, individualism is valued highly sometimes over and above the community. My rights and your rights are very important. So, too, to the Evangelical, the Christian life is a personal one, not necessarily a corporate one, that what the church does as a whole doesn’t matter as much as what the individual does and how the individual behaves.

Slide: Becoming who we are

But, this Armor of God passage in Ephesians was not addressed to a culture of individualism. It was addressed to a corporate culture, a church, to the people of God, who were at that time a minority group up against a very powerful empire known as the Roman Empire. These groups of Christians huddled together every Sunday afraid that Ceasar would persecute and kill them for not towing the line of worshiping Roman gods, and refusing the culture of the Roman Empire, which was an Empire not only oppressed minority groups, they dehumanized, especially those who resisted their way of

life. And, a very large, cruel and grand empire it was. The Roman peace, as it was called, was controlled by squashing anyone opposed to it and then assimilating them to be Roman citizens.

Slide: Suit Up

The writer of this letter to the church in Ephesus knew the power of the Roman Empire and how difficult it was to live as oppressed people and as a minority people within that empire. He would have known that by using roman military language such as breastplates, belts, and swords, that they would have understood that spiritual battle, to stand up and risk worship, to assemble as God's people, and to continue to spread a gospel of peace, speaking for the vulnerable and the poor; furthermore, to resist the evils of a culture that would go out of its way to make people seem less than human and demand that they worship instead Ceasar as their god.

To the early Christ followers, only Christ was Lord. To them, the poor, the widow, the outcast and the

vulnerable were the neighbor because it was for them that Christ ultimately came, bringing with him not an empire of domination, but rather God's peaceful reign on earth, a Kingdom of the cross, not a Kingdom of violent control.

Slide: Babylonian Lion

Indeed, in this reading from Ephesians and in other readings that speak of a 'satan', such as in the book of Job or even when Jesus speaks of 'satan', the word means "Accuser" or "Advesary". Somehow later in medieval folklore, Satan gets confused with Lucifer, the Morning Star, who in the book of Isaiah was a Babylonian pagan god that fell from heaven, hanging low in the morning sky. So, the people in the church of Ephesus weren't even thinking of Lucifer. Satan is simply an Adversary who accuses Christ and his followers. Most biblical scholars today acknowledge that the Satan for the first Christians was language representing the Roman Empire. The spiritual fight then, was to fight injustice, to

build up unity in Christ's church and to stand firm in the faith under the fear of persecution.

Ephesians – Who we are

So, you see, it can be difficult in our American culture to relate to these ideas the way that the first Christians did. What do we do with this? Well, I think we can learn from the first Christians in their struggle and apply it to how we are to love and serve the neighbor. And, I think we also can admit that like the first Christians, we do encounter what is true evil in the world...for there is evil, as we see daily in our lives, around us, and sometimes also within faith communities. There are even times when it can seem like to us evil as a strong force. It can be really frightening to watch what humans are capable of doing to each other.

Therefore, what is our Spiritual Warfare today? For, whenever we do a confession of sin, we never ever say that the devil made us do it. We are perfectly capable of sin without the help of Satan.

But, one thing I think we can take away and learn from the Christian community in Ephesus is that sometimes, the evil we do is not always individual evil. Sometimes it's corporate; sometimes it's an entire group of people that are responsible or complicit in that evil.

I grieve with my Roman Catholic brothers and sisters with the release of those atrocities and abuses that priests did to hundreds of boys and girls over all those years in Pennsylvania, those children and their families who were told that they could trust the authority of clergy. As a clergy person, it angers me greatly that it is allowed to happen. I cannot comprehend the crisis the Roman church is in and I do not pretend to understand their doctrines of ministry, but I can comprehend the grief this has caused so many people.

But, if we were to take a look at today's reading from Ephesians, what can we learn from just this example of clergy abuse? Well, we can see that it is not only the sin of individual priests but also of a system,

only in this case that system was the church. For, the system that housed it allowed it to happen and to keep happening. The system itself, now exposed, has within it today a Spiritual War whereby the people of God in those churches must resist that abuse from ever happening again. Our prayers must be with them.

Slide: Hunger

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, what cultural systems do we allow today in this world that ultimately harm others? Will we name these social forces out load, those that seek to make others less than human as the Roman empire once did- systems of hate and fear that continue around us, or do we put on our breastplates of righteousness and belts of truth to respond to the least of these, to the poor, the infirm and the vulnerable as the first believers did?

Do we defend our Christian faith in our works of love, showing that we are indeed a community that struggles to speak for those

who have no voice? Will we do the easy thing, to continue to allow the system to go on as it is because it's simpler not to respond? If anything, as modern people today, that is likely our greatest corporate sin - to do nothing.

Slide: Quilts

I look forward to your ideas on how we can do God's work with our hands here at St. John's - to be a river of compassion for the world - and as it says in this chapter of Ephesians, to put the shoes on our feet that make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. For although we are people who can be prone to evil, as all people are, we have also the gift of the Holy Spirit to help us fight that battle so that all may thrive in this world.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O God, my strength and my redeemer.

Amen.