

World Loyal Virtues

August 22, 2021

Christian Soldiers?

We live in a dark and yet wondrous time. A time of pandemic resurgence, the big election lie and the attempt to overturn the election, incivility, and the politicization and violence surrounding vaccinations and mask mandates (the human made horrors in Afghanistan and the tragedies wrecking havoc once again in Haiti). Frankly, a good portion of our world appears to have gone mad, seduced by superficial understandings of freedom and misinformation regarding science, not to mention political demagoguery.

Sadly, much of this incivility and dishonesty is coming from segments of the Christian community who identify Jesus with anti-science, anti-mask, and a rugged individualism contrary to the teachings of Jesus and the prophets.

So begins Dr. Bruce Epperly's analysis of our New Testament reading for today from the Letter to the Ephesians.

He goes on:

Whether or not you believe in the reality of demonic powers . . . there is a 'war' out there. You can see the forces of evil moving into battle – some with confederate flags, some waging war on women's equality and marriage equality, some denying or dismissing . . . global climate change, some separating children from their parents, some railing against a free press and diversity, some threatening scientists, doctors, and educators, politicians intentionally promoting chaos and division, and normalizing incivility and dishonesty, and religious leaders who are complicit, identifying politicians with God's will, and placing their political heroes above Jesus.

For much of my ministry, I've found our passage from Ephesians in which we're told to "put on the armor of God" to be too militaristic in tone. It has evoked images of the crusades and gun holsters emblazoned with crosses. But those are rooted in a misreading of the text. Those who use Ephesians as a springboard for violence and their "culture wars" are, once again, misconstruing the scriptures to fit their agenda.

You see, what our author is doing here is subtly reappropriating offensive and destructive imagery. (Think of it like how the LGBT community has reappropriated the word "queer.") This is another situation in which we, as followers of Jesus, are being told to flip the script, much like when we are told to turn our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks. Ephesians acknowledges that there are destructive forces at

work, both within our beings and in the world, and in order to overcome them we need to use not the tools of the enemy, not the tools of fear and manipulation and lying and greed, but the tools of God.

Friends, I know you're weary. Or if you aren't weary, you have been, or people you love deeply are. When we're weary, or frayed, or feel like we're embattled, it's easy to fall back into what Ephesians calls the ways of evil. But hear again our instruction:

Fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 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. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

It's interesting here that the majority of what we're told to put on is protective, not destructive in nature. Only the sword of the spirit is destructive. Destroy evil with the word of God, but in all other engagement, use virtue to protect yourself. Do what is good and right and honorable and just. When engaging the powers of destruction, use truth and righteousness and peace and faith and salvation, not their tools. Don't fight fire with fire. Don't burn the place down in your efforts to survive.

Application

Epperly ties this behavior, this use of Christlike virtues in the face of the forces of destruction to the analysis by Austrian Holocaust survivor and philosopher Viktor Frankl that, in the end, there is only one thing that cannot be taken away from us: the freedom of how we respond to life's challenges.

*"Difficulties do not excuse us from moral greatness.
We are largest in stature when we face life's challenges"* with grace. (Epperly)

That is, when we use Jesus' ways, even in times of suffering. Of course, the ultimate model of this is Jesus on the cross forgiving his enemies. Their hate (and their violent ways) did not "determine his response: his love is stronger than their fear, and his grace is stronger than their sin."

Conclusion

One of my favorite books of all times, "Good Omens" by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett, was made into a TV miniseries a couple of years ago. Because the book is over 30 years old, I feel like I can take the liberty of spoiling it for those of you who haven't read it.

"It is a satirical imagining of the Biblical apocalypse featuring angels, demons, humans, and the hosts of Heaven and Hell," except in "Good Omens," at the climax, the hero forges a different way forward instead of total annihilation. By embodying mercy and compassion, he circumvents the destruction of the world. In short, destruction is thwarted by truth and righteousness and peace, by the armor of God, not in battle, but in a

completely different way of being. Weariness and struggle are real. There's no denying it. And with today's scriptures, we are given the tools:

to protect ourselves from both internal and external forces. Many of us are imprisoned by anxiety, depression, trauma, and family of origin issues . . . In the era of national chaos, anxiety and fear are rampant, and we are right to worry about the fate of the earth along with constitutional protections. The powers that threaten are often greater than we can bear, and this threatens to undermine our spiritual and emotional integrity. Our only hope in responding to them is found in trusting God for our healing and aspiring to live by the highest and best despite the challenges of life. We also need a community to uphold us in prayerful support. No one is ever saved alone. We need a cloud of witnesses, a community of love, to sustain us in life's challenges. (Epperly)

In Celtic spirituality, travelers will often start a journey:

by drawing a circle around themselves and saying a prayer of protection. This prayer of protection reminded them that wherever they went they were surrounded by God's circle of love. They prayed, in the spirit of Patrick, with the affirmation that Christ is above, beneath, to the right and left, behind and before, and in all that we meet.

This week, in the spirit of putting on the armor of God, I encourage you to pray a Celtic prayer of protection with your body and this scripture. Sit in a quiet place, calm your mind, and then hold your arms out, and use them to inscribe a circle of God's protection around you as you read this passage again:

*I fasten the belt of truth around my waist,
and put on the breastplate of righteousness.
As shoes I put on whatever will make me ready
to proclaim the gospel of peace.
With all of these, I take the shield of faith,
with which I will be able to quench
all the flaming arrows that come my way.
Lastly, I take the helmet of salvation,
and the sword of the Spirit,
which is the word of God.*

Friends, a different way is possible, but using the enemy's tactics of lying and manipulating and hoarding aren't going to cut it. It's going to take you and me embodying God's ways to bring it to fruition. Let's get to work! Alleluia, and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
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