



Pentecost 14 – Proper 16 (B)

The Truth Will Make Us Odd

[RCL] Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

The writer Flannery O’Conner reportedly once said, “You shall know the truth and the truth will make you odd.” She was playing with the scripture verse where Jesus says, “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.” To be sure, there is freedom in knowing the truth of the Gospel. But to really know that truth, to really live the Gospel, will also make us odd. In the midst of a chaotic and violent world, a world of malevolent authorities and powers, we are called to be odd, and in our very oddness lies our freedom.

This call to oddness shows in the instructions to the church that we read in Ephesians. Our reading for today comes from the end of the letter where Paul exhorts the church to stand firm in the Christian faith and life, and in the battle against the spiritual forces of wickedness. As Paul says, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 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.”

This is an odd passage in many ways. Just prior to it, Paul was talking in pretty down-to-earth language about how to lead a moral life. And this is quite helpful because it’s about things we have some control over. For example, “Avoid obscene, silly, and vulgar talk.” Okay, we can do that. Then, in today’s passage, Paul shifts, rather abruptly, to talk about the “wiles of the devil,” the “spiritual forces of wickedness,” and our need to stay strong in a cosmic battle.

And here we might want to say, “Now hold on just a minute. How did I get plunked down in the middle of this fight? I’m not too sure I want any part of it. First of all, I didn’t start it. I’d much rather go home after church, have some lunch, and watch a game on television, or maybe go for a walk. Secondly, I’m not even too sure what I think about the devil and the spiritual forces of wickedness, but I am quite sure that I don’t want to tangle with them. I thought as Christians we were supposed to be lovers, not fighters. I

prefer to think of my baptism as the time when God adopted me as God's beloved child, not the time when God drafted me into God's spiritual fight club."

And yet, in this rather odd passage, this is precisely what seems to be happening. We are to get kitted out in the whole armor of God: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes to proclaim peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, getting ready for battle.

You may have noticed another odd thing about this passage. Yes, we are to put on the whole armor of God, which is a military image, but the pieces of the armor stand for decidedly unmilitary things. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes to proclaim the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. We are armed for battle with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, spirit.

This is a rather odd way to get ready for a fight. Quite frankly, if we had to get ready for battle, we might rather have things like a belt of terrible thunder, a breastplate of fiery fury, a sword of unconquerable might, and a few big strong guys to back us up.

But that is not the way it is for followers of Christ. We are told to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. We are told to put on truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and spirit, and to stand firm against the wiles of the devil and the spiritual forces of wickedness.

This may feel like we are being sent out like sheep among wolves, but we are also assured that this will be enough. Because another odd thing about the fight against the spiritual forces of evil is that the victory is already won.

St. Paul is quite clear in the early part of Ephesians that, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has already defeated the powers of sin, death, and the devil. As the old hymn puts it, "The strife is o'er, the battle done, the victory of life is won." But for Paul, this means that we are living in a strange in-between time, between the victory of Christ on the cross and the final glorification of Christ when every knee shall bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. Until that final glorification, we live in an overlapping of the old age and the new age, and the principalities and powers of the old age, even though they have been defeated, can still wreak havoc and cause harm.

We may have heard this situation described using the analogy of the invasion of Normandy by the Allied forces during the Second World War. After that victory, the war was essentially won. And yet, it took another year of hard fighting and many deaths along the way before final victory was proclaimed in Europe. Or we might think of an analogy from sports. One of the most dangerous times in a soccer match is when your team is up by so many goals that the other team couldn't possibly come back. But you need to play the game out until the final whistle, and since the opposing side can't win, they often resort to cheap shots. Think of how, when a relationship breaks up, some of the cruelest words are spoken on the

way out the door. Now, we wouldn't push these analogies too far, but you get the point. We are to stand firm against the wiles of the devil and the spiritual forces of wickedness in a battle that has already been won. We know all too well that they can still do damage. But their days are numbered.

And knowing this makes us free. The principalities and powers that Paul mentions are encountered in all the bullies of the world. These are the malign powers that rule in a world of domination and manipulation, where violence plants the seeds of counter-violence, which provokes further responses of retaliation and revenge. And the way they hold onto their power is by trying to convince us that this is the way things have always been and the way things always will be. These are the bullies that tell us that might makes right, that the only way we can unite ourselves is by scapegoating others, and that the people who die with the most toys win. Jesus unmasked and defeated these powers through his cross and resurrection. Jesus shows us that God's compassion is greater than the murderous passions of our world, that God's glory can and does shine even in the darkest night of human savagery, that God's forgiving love is greater than our paralyzing awareness of sin, that God's way of life is greater than our way of death. And knowing these truths, and trying to live the gospel, will make us odd.

No matter what the bullies of the world try to tell us, whether they occupy the highest positions of power in the nations, or the boardrooms of corporations, or are just the local hooligans in our schools and neighborhoods, we will choose compassion, we will choose hope, we will choose forgiveness, we will choose life. We will put on the full armor of God and live in truth and righteousness and peace and faith and salvation and the spirit. And in our world today, this will make us odd.

It will also make us free. We can stand firm in the Lord and in the strength of his power because we know that the principalities and powers of the old age have already been defeated. When the bullies of this world confront us, we will speak the truth and tell them that their days are numbered, we will practice a higher righteousness that will not return evil for evil, and will proclaim to them the Gospel of peace, making known to them God's offer of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Try as they may, these bullies will not be able to defeat us because, as St. Paul says in Romans, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Knowing this truth will make us odd. It will also set us free.

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