

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2024

Deuteronomy 4:12, 6-9

Ephesians 6:10-20

Mark 7:14-23

There is a growing authoritarianism in America. Is this a spiritual battle? Christians are taught to see the world in spiritual terms. Jesus said: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). Do those words describe a spiritual battle? Authoritarianism, by definition, does not celebrate freedom. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). Do you believe that? Do you believe that the Lord Christ has won a victory that can never be undone, never be diminished? We most certainly *do* believe that. There is an odd tension that a Christian lives in. God calls us to defend what is true and good and beautiful. God calls us to actively participate in a spiritual battle that rages around us while assuring us that the outcome is not in doubt. Satan is a defeated enemy (Colossians 2:15). His wretched head was crushed beneath the nail-pierced foot of the crucified King (Hebrews 2:14). And yet the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8). We are still in a spiritual battle.

How do you feel about that? Are you interested, engaged, prepared for battle? Some of you are gentle. This in no way diminishes your grit or your determination or your ability to stand in the face of evil. But it is true, some of you, some of us are gentle. “Bellicose” is an adjective describing people who demonstrate aggression and an eagerness to fight. Not many of you are bellicose. “Jingoistic” is a derogatory adjective that describes people who have a warlike approach to relations with other nations. Not many of you are jingoistic. But you are in a battle. Any attempt to escape this battle is both vain and foolish. You may not have asked for it, but you’re in it. It is most certainly a spiritual battle. “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Judas, Herod, Pharaoh, Jezebel – they had flesh and blood but our battle wasn’t really against them. There are those who have flesh and blood who imperil our children, who would greatly restrict your freedom, who would corrupt what is good and true and beautiful. Satan stands behind evil. Those flesh and blood people can trace their spiritual ancestry to the devil.

Jesus said this to some of His flesh and blood opponents: “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me” (John 8:44-45). It’s a spiritual battle. God gives us spiritual armor. God doesn’t ask you politely if you might consider putting it on. He outfits you with incredible gifts and He certainly expects you to make use of these gifts. Remember, this is His battle, His gifts and His tactics. What He gives you is not a puny toy to be discarded for some manmade instrument. His armor is superlative. The tools of this battle are heavenly. You, as a warrior, are Christ-like. Love and truth and grace and humility and devotion make you a superlative warrior. His attributes. His strength. His victory.

St. Paul writes this to conclude his letter to Ephesians: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Ephesians 6:10-11). Armor; what you put on is Christ. A battle is taking place and what you put on is Christ. “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27 NIV). The crucified and risen Son of God is your armor. What does that make you? In this spiritual battle, what does that make you? Here’s St. Paul writing to the Romans: “The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Romans 13:12). God’s enemies are fearsome. Satan has designed your fall. The flaming darts of the evil one include stripping truth of its inherent meaning. That endeavor is well under way. What will you do?

Take up the shield of faith. Christ says this to you: “You are in my army and under my flag. I am the way, the truth and the life. Receive with honor the instruments of my victory. The belt of my truth, the breastplate of my righteousness, the shield of my death and resurrection – this is the armor I give you and I expect you to employ it.” It’s only by God’s weapons that the evil one will be thwarted. Do you doubt this? Here are two very practical aspects to this battle. First, our children need to be protected. How will we do this? We will teach them. We will equip them. Christ’s armor is theirs. They need to know that this is a battle, a real, consequential and lifelong battle. Gently, they will be given more and more purpose in this battle, more and more responsibility. We cannot shield them from this battle forever. We are obligated to teach them. Ultimately, they must learn to stand with us, to stand with Christ, to take their place and stand immovable. It is an endeavor that pleases God, to teach children about Christian warfare. To learn Scripture (2 Timothy 3:14-17); to learn how to serve (John 13:14-17); to learn how to pray (Luke 11:2-4); to learn to bless those who curse (Luke 6:28); to learn to love those who hate (Luke 6:27); to shine like stars in the universe as they hold out the Word of life (Philippians 2:15-16); we will teach our children.

Secondly, no matter what, we must remain true to God’s Word. How long? As long as we breathe. The battle may grow more intense. God could bring this whole warfare to a sudden close. He may extend it. Either way, we will be ready. Satan masquerades as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). His adherents are in powerful positions with a great deal of influence. Deceit by redefining words, vacuous spirituality, humanism masquerading as a gateway to life, divination practices, pagan idolatry with the promise of power and wealth – Satan has many names and many strongholds within our culture. And it all comes down to the fact that the Son of God was crucified for the world’s sin and rose again. Our Captain stands on the battle ground as a victorious Giver of grace. His wounds are our armor. Thy Kingdom come! Thy will be done! Easter is a reality that can never be undone. We don’t gain more ground for Him because the whole world is already His. The victory of Easter is not partial. The reign of death and darkness and deceit is ended. Christ’s life is unleashed in our generation and there is nothing more forceful than the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6-7). He brings sinners into His realm and His reign. He uplifts those who are mired in their guilt and shame. His blood delivers us from fear and isolation and slavery. Forgiveness and salvation are a liberation that takes charge of your soul and leads you to heaven. His truth is marching on.

The Lord Christ fully entered the battle. He took up our flesh and blood and the battle was entirely centered on Him. He came to win. The spite; the hatred; the vitriol; He suffered the

battle. God's battle; God's tactics; Jesus laid down His life. That's the most glorious thing this world has ever known; the pure and holy Son of God laid down His life to win our freedom. On the cross, Jesus fights and wins the battle. Because of His sacrifice, no one (nothing) can ever make you a slave again. If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:36). We stand with Him. Immovable, steadfast, we stand with Him (1 Corinthians 15:58).

It is perhaps the greatest honor any of us could ever have – to defend the Gospel, to wear His armor, to brandish the sword of the Spirit. The greatest honor you will ever have in this life – to stand with Christ, to speak the truth in love, and to shine like the stars as you hold out the word of Jesus and His cross, Jesus and His church, Jesus and His grace. We do this together. We do it with great intentionality. We have been grafted into Christ's church, each one of us. We intend to be exactly what the Lord desires us to be. The source of our strength is Him and Him alone. May His mercy be upon us all.