FIGHTING THE WRONG ENEMIES

Most of the time, believe it or not, I preach about what I think Jesus wants me to talk to you about. Maybe the Message seems to be getting fuzzy, or some of you are struggling with aberrations that make walking the Path even more difficult than it already is. I am aware, for instance, that some of you are having problems with how to think about “miracles,” and what do you pray for when someone you love is sick or in trouble. I cannot make the problems go away, but I can help to make it clearer how faithful Christians can approach such things. Only, it takes more than a few minutes with me doing all the talking. So that will be the subject of our next Sanctuary Chat (September 20). Sermons never come out as clearly as I hoped and intended, but I’m used to that. It is a broken realm; nothing is perfect here. So what am I supposed to do – duck? We all wrestle with that from time to time.

On occasion, like today, I preach to my own weakness. You can listen in, in case you have some of the same struggles I do. But I am really trying to get my own life more aligned with the Path we are trying to walk. “Fighting the Wrong Enemies” is more than a sermon title to me. I still fight the wrong enemies from time to time. I get past it at other times – see through the pitfalls and booby traps. But then I get careless or too stressed or too busy, and all at once, there I am again: flailing away at the wrong enemies.

Scripture often grounds us and reminds us of the principles of our Path. So first, to the Scripture passages. It is only the ninth chapter of Luke, but Jesus is already heading for Jerusalem, where He will make His last bid to be crowned King (Messiah) – and He will end up crucified. But He has to get there first. If we read the story carefully, we realize that there are already forces – King Herod and the High Priest, among others – who do not want Jesus to reach Jerusalem at Passover time. There are Jewish soldiers and assassins on His trail. Jesus has sent out His friends to discover the safest route from Galilee to Jerusalem. Very early in this journey, just across the Esdraelon Valley from Galilee, they come into Samaritan territory. That is where this passage picks up the story.

Jesus has some friends among the Samaritans, but they are isolated pockets of people who got to know Him under special circumstances. When the Samaritans learn that Jesus and His
companions are heading for Jerusalem, they give them a very cold shoulder. Years before, when the exiles from Judea were returning from Babylon to rebuild the temple (under Ezra and Nehemiah), the Samaritans – the remnant from the Northern Kingdom – wanted to join in the restoration and help rebuild Judaism. But they were told that they were half-breeds and could not participate in the covenant – it was against Torah laws. And how could the returning exiles, believing they themselves had been punished for not keeping the covenant in the first place, allow the Samaritans to participate now – against covenant law?

The endless misunderstandings between God’s will and human interpretations have dogged our steps for as far back as anyone can remember. Many of them no longer matter very much, except to the direct participants. In any case, here the animosity between Jew and Samaritan resurfaces. The Samaritans do not want to extend hospitality to anyone heading for Jerusalem and the temple – the place where they had been so painfully rejected. To be sure, Scripture is inerrant, so clearly the Samaritans are in the wrong, and Jesus is an idiot for befriending them. But that is just me saying I still have problems with fighting the wrong enemies.

In this passage, James and John are angry because the Samaritans are being rude and unwelcoming to Jesus. Do the Samaritans not know that Jesus has good friends in a Samaritan village not many miles from here? Do they not realize that Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, risking His reputation among good Jews in order to befriend them? So the disciples want to stop and “have it out” with these ungrateful and belligerent bastards. “Jesus turned and rebuked them.” Come on, Luke! What did Jesus really say? What was the rebuke?

Did He say, “Hey fellas, keep your eye on the ball. I am heading into the biggest challenge of my life, and you want to stop and quarrel with some villagers who hurt your feelings and insulted us? This is a quarrel nobody has won for over four hundred years.” Or did Jesus say, “This is not our WAY – this is not what we are about! How many times do I have to tell you: we are not in the judgment business; we are in the forgiveness business.” But we cannot know what the rebuke really was. Luke only tells us that Jesus rebuked them.

It is nevertheless obvious that Jesus will not be drawn off His course. The Samaritans are not His enemies, whatever their own
feelings and opinions on the matter. Jesus has bigger issues to deal with. Part of His faithfulness is a refusal to be drawn into lesser fights. That is a huge theme in His life, when we start to track it. Jesus will not become a zealot. He will not fight the Romans, even though they occupy His homeland. He will not fight Pilate or King Herod, no matter how much they deserve it. He will not go to war against poverty or hunger or even disease, though many of His followers try to make this claim for Him to this very day. He will quarrel with Pharisees and other religious leaders who are sidetracking everybody from a true relationship with God. But even that is not His true mission or purpose. Jesus will fight against Sin, Death, and the Devil (to remember an old phrase), but what the Cross, the Resurrection, and Pentecost finally reveal is that Jesus has come to reconcile us to God. The fight is for a better, truer, deeper relationship with God than any of us have ever had before.

Why would that help anything? It would change everything! That is the missing piece to everything else we want, strive for, and try to accomplish. Do we truly know and trust and honor and obey God? All of life here is a journey between two gardens: The Garden of Eden, where we end up saying, “Not Thy will, but mine be done.” And the Garden of Gethsemane, where we end up saying, “Not my will, but Thine be done.” Of course, on the surface, the Garden of Gethsemane always looks to us like total and irreparable defeat. But that is because we are too terrified to wait in the darkness for three whole days.

After meditating and contemplating all of this and much more, what do we find in the passage in Ephesians? “Our struggle is not against human foes.” Somehow, even if we are not “there” yet ourselves, we know that this is what Jesus knows. No matter how wrong we sometimes are, no matter how many mistakes we make, no matter how slow we are to catch on to Jesus’ Message and where He is trying to lead us, Jesus does not call us His enemies. His grace and mercy and understanding are overwhelming. How many times do we get ... to repent and ask forgiveness? Seventy times seven (He said). Do not be literalist or wooden with this. SEVEN IS A HOLY NUMBER. Only three people in the world at that time could have multiplied seven times seventy with Roman numerals, and none of them lived in Palestine. Arabic numerals would not be invented for another five hundred years. Seventy times seven means infinity. With Jesus, we have endless chances to repent and find forgiveness. Even that may not be enough for me, but at least it gives me hope while I am here.
Our fight is not with other humans. However wrong they may be, they are under bondage too. It is not their true selves or their best selves that I am struggling with. God help me to remember this. I never remember consistently enough, clearly enough, or with a true and deep conviction. It is what Jesus has to do with me, but I am not nearly good enough with this when it comes to others.

There are cosmic powers. Many of you do not believe in them. Some of you still want to assume that if there are any forces or beings in the heavenly realms, they are all good, kind, beneficent. You can read the story of Jesus in the wilderness after His baptism, but you pay scant attention to the Satan part. You hope it is just mythology or metaphor or some kind of symbolism. We can know the stories of Jesus and Paul and Augustine and Luther – all of whom ran into Satan at every turn – but they were just primitive or gullible or not very evolved.

Our true enemies, according to Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, are “superhuman forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” They are the real influence that keeps so many people and so many events going wrong here. And if we do not wake up enough to tend to our relationship with Jesus, with God, with the Holy Spirit, these forces will take us off course too, and over and over. The spiritual realms are as real as the physical realms – and then some. But the warfare with God is not finished there, any more than it is here. If we think that every thought and urge and instinct is coming from the true God – well, that is not my experience. Nor is it the conclusion of most of the people I have been talking with for the last fifty years.

I am not very good at remembering this, as I have already confessed. I get annoyed with people who seem to be the problem I am focused on at the moment. “Screw going to Jerusalem; let’s fight with the Samaritans.” Never mind my own mistakes and foibles; it is the fundamentalists who are ruining Christianity for thousands of people. Never mind my own mistakes and foibles; the United Church of Christ is constantly going off on tangents and trying to save the world with “justice and peace” programs that I don’t think are just and that will never lead to true peace. So now we will save the world with our logic and our own loving efforts, so who needs a real Savior anymore?

I am so delighted with the recent Supreme Court decision to honor gay marriages. Yet I am still annoyed with the “Open and Affirming” process in the UCC that left the faithful people in our
congregations across the land with no scriptural or theological grounds for accepting homosexuals as equal children of God with all the rest of us. So I wrote and spoke about it and I married gay couples, but I never wanted to lead a congregation into the “Open and Affirming” category. If you live in a church where everyone becomes a member by writing their own covenant, how do you get more open and affirming than that? Of course, few people were paying any attention to me. And because I did not support the “Open and Affirming” process, some concluded – without bothering to find out the truth – that I was anti-gay. They did not know any of the people who were grateful to me for showing scriptural and Christian principles for supporting gay rights and gay people.

For example, after I retired a few years ago and went to Port Townsend, Washington, to live, the Deacons of the Mercer Island UCC church where I was the Pastor for fifteen years prior to coming here the first time thought it would be nice to have me come be the guest preacher one Sunday. However, they had a gay Minister at the time, and when he heard they had invited me to come preach, he closed down the invitation. The Deacons folded without protest, and I have not set foot in that church since. That Minister had an interesting interpretation of what it means to be “open and affirming.” Apparently I am not the only one who sometimes fights the wrong enemies. Hardly a surprise. Of course, it was a high compliment to me that he knew that one sermon from me in the middle of the summer would undo everything he was trying to accomplish.

But that time I remembered that he was not the real enemy. I never said a word to him or anyone else about it. I went to Omaha instead. And sometimes, despite the inconsistency, I am proud of the UCC for being the first mainline denomination to openly fight for gay rights and gay ordination.

Yet I still get confused from time to time. Even though I know (or think I know) that when human beings seem to me to be in the center of wrong approaches and bad developments, they are merely the dupes – the pawns – of cosmic beings far more powerful than themselves. I can know that and believe it most of the time. But when I get too close to the damage going on, I find it easy to forget. I get annoyed or angry or I find myself wanting to protect the people who are getting hurt. And from time to time I find myself at war with other humans who seem to be causing or at least perpetuating the damage. Never mind Jerusalem; let’s fight the Samaritans.
That’s just my way of saying that if you know me or care about me, you will sometimes be led astray along with me, if you are not very careful. I may feel terrible about it after a while, but rarely during the heat of the fray. The only people who do not fight just wars are the people on the other side.

So be warned. We want to follow Jesus. And Jesus is heading for Jerusalem. His purpose is always to reconcile all people to God. Keep praying. Keep following Him. And try not to squander time and life fighting the wrong enemies.