

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND FRANK WADE

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost



26 August 2018

Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18

Psalm 34:15-22

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

August is the pre-season. Whether you are a football fan or not, you know the pace of life quickens in September but now it is slow. Everybody is out of town or thinks they are, so guest preachers fill pulpits. Nobody reads books with footnotes, nobody launches a major program at this time of the year. Everybody knows that the main business of August is getting ready for September. It is pre-season in schools, offices, sports leagues, book clubs and civic enterprises. If August has any focus at all it is on remembering and mastering the fundamentals of September's enterprise, whatever that enterprise might be. For that reason, I am sure the lesson from Ephesians was written in August because it is a review of the basics of Christian living. Like a good coach, St. Paul reminds his readers of the opponent they are facing and the discipline it takes to prevail. We are a long way from Ephesus and the first century, but the fundamentals have not changed—which, when you think of it, is probably why they are called fundamentals.

The opponent we all face, says St. Paul, is the Devil. We are getting ready “to stand against the wiles of the Devil.” Paul's initial readers knew what that meant. For the most part, we have forgotten and allowed that devil to become a cartoon image. But the Devil is simply a fictional representation of an intangible reality.

We accept and understand many fictional representations of intangible realities: Uncle Sam is one, college mascots are another. Political cartoons rely on that sort of thing. We speak easily of bull and bear markets without confusing economics with animals. We know they are a representation of other realities. When we focus on the fictional aspect we tend to miss the reality. That is both foolish and dangerous. The concept of Satan, the Devil, works the same way.

The reality Satan represents is the force of evil in this world. If you doubt that reality, consider this simple fact. We know that evil is a force because it takes energy to resist it. Your physics book does not list that kind of energy, but if you have ever tried to lose weight, stop smoking, drink less, control your temper, watch your language or just be a better person, you know that something pushes against that intent and makes that hard to do. That something is our common experience of the force of evil; it is what pushes and pulls and makes it hard for us to fulfil our best intentions. That force is the reality Satan represents.

Paul says it is not just the Devil but the “wiles of the Devil.” It is not a brute force that pushes us away from what we seek to do or be in life, it is subtle and seductive. The wiles of the Devil mostly come to us as rationalizations. One drink won't hurt. I deserve a reward. It is not my fault. I can start tomorrow. Everybody does it. It won't make any difference, and so on. In these examples, we are talking about evil in the little bits and pieces of life we all experience, but the dynamic is the same in cases of rape, murder, and mayhem or the higher forms of political drama going on around us now. Everybody from a dictator to a drunk, from a school shooter to a serial snacker falls for some form of rationalization. The social consequences may be vastly different, but the wiles of the Devil behind them are the same. That is what we will be wrestling with come September.

How do we do that? St. Paul provides us with a wonderful set of images combined as “the whole armor of God.” They are worthy of our ruminations at any time. I am not going to go through all of them this morning – it is August after all – but will just hold up what I think are the two keys: the belt of truth and breastplate of righteousness.

If the wiles of the Devil come to us as rationalizations, the antidote to them is the truth.

- One drink won't hurt is a lie. One drink hurts because it is the only door to the second and the third. If that door is not opened, nothing bad can happen.
- I deserve a reward is a trap. If we deserve a reward let it be the reward of being the person you set out to be, not a chance to something less.
- It is not my fault is a cheap fig leaf. Many things are not our fault, but our behaviour is always our responsibility.
- I can start tomorrow is an illusion. The only time we can be faithful is now, this day, this moment. Tomorrow is made of dreams. Reality is always and only today.
- Everybody does it is a cop-out. Everybody will not be doing it if we refuse to do it.
- It doesn't matter is a cowardly cringe. What we do always matters because who we are and how we behave is the only thing we can control in life, the only thing we can offer to our God.

The belt of truth does not always fit comfortably; our nation is struggling with it now. But it is essential to our ability to withstand the wiles of the Devil.

Righteousness is a mocking word to many of us referring to a kind of ostentatious piety we do not admire. That is not what it means here. Righteousness literally means “right use-ness.” In other words, doing the right thing. The key is ‘doing.’ Christianity is a verb, an action word. It is not just something we remember or hope, not just something we sing about, not just something we rely on in emergencies. It is something we do with our time, our energy, and our money. It is the way we drink, the way we treat people, the way we face responsibility, how we prioritize, the ways we are unique, and the manner in which we matter to ourselves, to our world, and to our God. The breastplate of righteousness is made out of verbs, doing the right thing.

In just six days it will be September, the beginning of ‘real time’, when the pace of life quickens, and things begin to really count. It is full of opportunities, possibilities and challenges. And in the middle of it all, there is the Devil, the wily force of evil, ready to push, pull, and trip us with rationalizing scams, anything to keep us from being the people God created and calls us to be.

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