

## WHY SUCH OPPOSITION?

I want to avoid a possible misunderstanding. Don't we all. Rodger and Catherine and Joey and several others can vouch for the fact that this sermon has been on the calendar – on the list of upcoming sermons – for many months. It has nothing to do with a recent congregational meeting that raised the question of making vocatio our top mission. We will not be talking this morning about the resolution to make vocatio our top mission. We will bring that up again at our Annual Meeting in January. And it is simple; no need to play word games. If you don't like vocatio, vote against the resolution. If the calling of the Holy Spirit seems big enough, central to our WAY, and exciting enough to you, vote for the resolution.

I wanted to preach this sermon shortly before our Fall Retreat in the hope that we could clarify some of the issues and some of the realities of opposition between the spiritual realm and the physical or temporal realm, and thus not have to deal as much with this topic while on the Retreat itself.

As most of us have long since discovered, we live in a place of dual realities. The spiritual realm and the physical realm exist and run along beside each other. Often they intersect each other. Sometimes they are relatively peaceful in this coexistence – at times, and for a while. But they run on different principles and they have very different values and purposes. So from time to time they are in tension and even in serious opposition to each other. Some of us have a tendency to forget or downplay this reality, so we get surprised when the warfare between these two realms breaks out again. That often means we get discouraged, or we blame ourselves or others for this “trouble” as if it could be prevented if only we would all just be a little nicer to each other.

In the fourth chapter of James, this comment: *“Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”* James never understood the solution, but at least he understood the problem.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus instructs us to pray: *“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”* A strange thing to put in a prayer – the central prayer of our WAY, our Walk – if the two realms are getting along just fine together. Despite all our sincere

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efforts and desires to hope and pretend that it is not necessary, still the physical/survival realm ends up crucifying God's Messiah. Nevertheless, the two realms continue to run along side by side. And we are all caught in this duality for as long as we live on this earth.

While we are on the subject, THE KINGDOM is Jesus' top and favorite message. "*Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" Parable after parable and teaching after teaching are about "the Kingdom." The Kingdom has come – it is being fulfilled in our hearing. We have to be born anew – born fresh – to see it, yet many "*have eyes but do not see; have ears but do not hear.*" Jesus, at His baptism, is awakened to the Kingdom. God is right there with Him, and He will never be the same again. Only, it's not a later, after-you-die kind of thing. It's a NOW thing. In short, Jesus now sees and knows the spiritual dimension running alongside the physical dimension. He knows it is real. He sees it all around Him. And that's what makes Him so dangerous.

On the Retreat next weekend, we will be asking ourselves how well we recognize the "Signs of the Kingdom." Do we notice the presence of the Kingdom when we see and experience it? Theoretically, it should be helpful if we know the difference between what is all around us because of the physical realm and what is around us and available to us because of the spiritual realm. We certainly do not have time to get into that in the brevity of one Sunday morning service. But if we can come to terms, at least to some degree, with the conflict between the two realms themselves, it will save a lot of confusion and endless inner turmoil for all of us. Whether you are able to attend the Retreat next weekend or not, coming to terms with the conflict between the two realms is basic to our concepts of what Jesus is telling us and what the Christian Life is about.

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I suspect that all of us have struggled from time to time with the strange paradox: Jesus comes to us with a Message about God's love – He comes inviting us into a Great Kingdom of love and light – but it causes Him to be hated, opposed, reviled and, arguably, more rejected than any other person we have ever known about.

It makes it worse, not better, that we know many other messengers who have come with beautiful messages of hope and love but have had a very hard time in this world as well. Socrates, Jeremiah, and Isaiah come to mind. But once the mind begins to ponder such things, it quickly turns into a great cloud of witnesses. It almost seems like the purer and more positive the message, the greater the anger and opposition will be – in terms of the response of our natural world. This is true pretty much across all cultures, all religions, all ages, and all circumstances.

Muhammad came with a message and a call for peace and unity and brotherhood between all the warring tribes of Arabia. If they would all submit to the will of Allah and let Allah unite them, they would survive and even become great. But this seemingly beautiful message was also a threat to the authority and control of each tribal chieftain. If Allah ruled, what would happen to *their* rule? Besides, this kind of unity and cooperation was not the way it had been done in the past; it was not the way everybody was used to. So Muhammad became one of the most hated men in history. However great the veneration now, it seems sheer mystery and miracle that he survived long enough to shape and form the great religion that sometimes bears his name but most often is called simply “Islam,” after his primary principle: submission (to Allah).

In our time, do all Muhammadans follow his way and teachings with true submission and understanding? Of course! Just like all Christians understand and follow the ways and teachings of Jesus. Do Muhammadans ever read the Koran? Do Christians ever read the Bible? The Koran is filled with regard, respect, appreciation, and honor for Jesus. How often do we pick that up from the news reports?

Muhammad came on the scene five hundred years after Jesus, so of course we never hear about Islam in the New Testament. Otherwise we would have the parable of “The Good Muhammadan.” You have met them, so you know it's true. “*Other sheep I have that are not of this fold.*” (John 10:16)

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Sometimes we need the larger picture in order to get our bearings. But sometimes we need to get down to tiny situations and specific illustrations to make sure we are not just making things up. Paul is not making things up, and he has the scars to prove it. Some of you have scars that prove it too, but they are not always the kind that show on the outside. In any case, here in the second chapter of First Thessalonians: *“After all the injury and outrage which as you know we had suffered at Philippi, by the help of our God we declared the gospel of God to you frankly and fearlessly in the face of great opposition.”* Two realms running alongside each other, often at war with each other.

There it is again: What kind of nasty, ugly, insulting, evil message is Paul preaching that it causes so much anger and opposition wherever he goes? The “Good News of God” – the “Good News of the Kingdom”? Can we still hear Paul’s message? What do we think he is actually saying? We can piece it together pretty well. He’s saying: “You are loved by God. You have a better future than you have ever imagined. You can step out of the falseness and counterfeit hopes going on all around you – step out at any time, even this very minute – and live in the Kingdom of God’s Messiah from now on. As surety – as backup for such incredible claims – God has raised Him from the dead. I did not believe it at first either – could not imagine it might actually be true. But I have seen this Resurrected Lord – encountered Him – and spoken with Him many times since. It is the only reason I have come here, bringing this Message to you. He sent me because He loves you too.”

And what is the response? Kill him. Beat him. Banish him. Drive him out. And the same goes for anybody who befriends him or believes him. Paul is no “Jesus,” but Paul demonstrates patterns similar to Jesus’ patterns the longer Paul remains a true follower.

Abraham Lincoln is possibly the most renowned saint of American history. A recent movie titled simply *Lincoln* has charmed many of us by the way it was able to reveal the pressures and realities that surrounded Lincoln in his struggle to pass the Thirteenth Amendment to our Constitution. Nothing is ever resolved at a single stroke; many times the right move makes things worse for a while. That is one of the eerie realities of the warfare between our two realms. Satan never departs. He only withdraws to wait for an opportune time. One of my chief complaints against the liberal church (and the liberal church is my camp; it is where I come from and where I have lived all my life) is that it thinks evil is a pushover – that all it takes is a little

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kindness, a little love, a little money, a little generosity and we can make everything right. This notion has betrayed me and the people I care about all the days of my life. We are in constant and continual spiritual warfare all the days of our lives – or we have been bought off by the enemy.

Lincoln died for what he believed in. How else can we call it? In Redlands, California, where I was a Pastor many years ago, there is a Lincoln Memorial right near the public library. No doubt things have changed after all these years, but years ago the directors of the Lincoln Memorial were the least Lincoln-like people imaginable. They collected artifacts, and very effectively. Any button, book, piece of clothing, piece of paper that Lincoln had ever touched was precious to them. They would go to extreme lengths to acquire any such articles. But it did not seem to translate into any veneration for what Lincoln believed in or worked for. It was probably just a vocabulary problem – a little mix-up: “With malice toward all; with charity for none.” Such things happen. (Jesus comments: *“You build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are the sons of those who murdered the prophets.”* (Matthew 23:29-31) But that’s just Jesus – gentle, meek, and mild.)

I am simply reminding myself, and you, that no matter where we go, no matter where we turn, huge animosity between the Kingdom of God (the spiritual realm) and the kingdoms of this world (the physical or natural realm) is evident and powerful and pervasive. Yet over and over, if I bring it up, if I make comment about it – if I try to awaken people to the realities of our spiritual warfare – people try to slough it off or pretend I am just being overdramatic. Or they get annoyed because I am being what they call “negative.” Some even use it as an excuse for paying less attention to the church. Many go back to the pleasures or the denial games of our current society. Knowing we are in serious spiritual warfare does not match – does not fit – with being lackadaisical about our spiritual disciplines and our commitments.

The problem is, the warfare does not cease just because we cease to pay attention to it. Nobody is more aware than I am that no true church operates by coercion; we do not all have the same perspectives or opinions. Yet those who live in denial of the warfare also live in denial of the Savior who came precisely because of our plight. I do not mean they deny that Jesus came here, but to many He is merely a

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teacher, a nice man, a good influence – but not our Savior. That leads into a deep despair, when we *could* be heading into a greater joy and hope than this world has ever known. If Jesus is God’s Messiah – our Savior – that changes everything: all the rules, all the expectations, all the goals, all the hopes.

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So what does cause the anger and animosity between the two realms? People in the physical realm like to be treated well, cared about, cherished. Why the huge rift and the murderous animosity that seem to occur so frequently when a messenger of the spiritual realm announces love or a call to community or a vision of acceptance and respect and harmony?

I do not know, of course; not in any great depth. What does seem clear is that there is a layer of threat between the two realms. That is, they work on different principles and have a different idea of where authority comes from. All values in the physical realm are connected to the mandate for physical survival. All values in the spiritual realm are connected to the awareness of a relationship between us and God (creature to Creator). The ramifications of the difference between those two are endless.

Why should I tithe – pay tribute to God – when that impacts my bank account and my resources for physical survival? This looks ridiculous to the physical realm. Why should I *hold back* my tithe, when I owe everything to God and truly want God’s Kingdom – God’s reign and influence on earth – to increase? This looks ridiculous to the spiritual realm. They do not always have to fight, but there is no reconciling those two perspectives.

It morphs from there into endless places and principles. On the Christian Path, we die to this world. We are baptized into Jesus’ death. It is the symbol of our switching allegiance from one realm to the other. Death no longer holds us – it cannot control us. Survival is no longer our top value. In fact, it is no value at all. If true LIFE comes from being resurrected, the physical realm loses the leverage it once had for controlling us and dictating our choices. Jesus is, of course, the ultimate illustration and demonstration of this different reality.

And the Chief Priests, the Sanhedrin, Pilate, and King Herod, among others, show us something of how infuriating it is when physical authority confronts spiritual authority. Jesus does not

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respond or react according to all the rules and realities of the physical domain. This feels unforgivable to those who are still operating under the authority – under the fear and the demands – of the physical realm, where survival is the top value. The cruelty of a crown of thorns and beatings – and of course finally the Cross itself – is a growing desire to *make* Jesus admit to the truth and come back under the authority of the realm of the physical world. The fury of watching somebody who is free from what is controlling *you* quickly goes beyond all bounds of logic and rational behavior. Fury really does not think straight.

More and more it starts to open up for us. Those who live for the spiritual realm can appreciate money, success, power. Only, it is not for physical survival. It is for resources for the Kingdom. The physical domain can never understand that. And if money is not for survival or success or all the toys that fit under such categories, then all the principles have shifted into a different realm. For Jesus, for Paul – for thousands of us now – it is not like it used to be. We can take it or leave it alone. Paul says he knows how to live with plenty, or in want: *“I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”* (Philippians 4:12-13) It is not one condition or the other; either one will do. If the fear is gone, the pressure is off.

Some of us cannot believe that Paul sees or thinks this way. In fact, I have known a few people who have become annoyed just reading this passage from Paul. What right has Paul got to be so aloof and confident, when the real issues of reality are still facing us? A little spiritual awareness is okay maybe; a little spiritual truth is fine – as long as it doesn’t get out of hand; as long as it doesn’t translate into some kind of idealism, or some kind of woolly-headed thinking that really would threaten our success or our survival here.

In any case, I have made the point for those who can receive it. The truth is that the evidence is everywhere around us, and down through all the ages we have known. The spiritual dimension threatens the physical dimension. It does because it runs on different values and different purposes. And what that means to each one of us is that the more we awaken to the spiritual realm – the more we turn our will and our lives over to the guidance of the Holy Spirit – the more likely we are to run into strife, anger, and animosity from those who still live in the awareness and the realities of the physical realm.

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Some of them are very wonderful, conscientious, hard-working people; they are trying to make life better for themselves and their loved ones. Some of them may end up thinking that we are mocking this, or even that we are somehow saying that it is wrong or bad or unimportant. If that becomes their conclusion, they will not be friendly toward us any longer. Yet that is not our big problem with them. We cannot be people-pleasers and keep our allegiance to God at the same time. The problem is that our codes and principles go on valuing them whether they like us any longer or not.

But we have an even greater problem than that. The WAY we have chosen – the Christian Life – is not “natural” to us. It is immersed in spiritual realities – not natural realities. Hence if we let down our guard, revert to automatic pilot – even for a brief period of time – our lives get quickly sucked back into the thinking, responses, and reactions of our physical natures. That is what it means to be a spiritual warrior. It is not necessary for us to pray every day just because we want a gold star beside our name. It is not about us being pious. It is not even about our wanting the guidance and wisdom of the Holy Spirit’s presence, though we want that very much. But the real necessity – the real need – is that if we do not stay focused and in tune with the Spirit, we will quickly revert to the ways of the physical realm and all of its perspectives and values. Such careless moments, even after we come to our senses again, can take weeks or even months to recover from.

October 1st was my 34th AA birthday. I have it together now, right? Staying sober is duck soup. Everybody knows that alcohol is cunning, baffling, and powerful. But what turned the corner for me was a friend who added: “Patient.” Alcohol is also patient – like Satan. If you are an alcoholic, it will always be waiting for you: day in and day out; year in and year out; wherever you go; no matter what else is going on. It only takes one careless moment – one opportune time. Sin, of which alcoholism is only one manifestation, is also patient. We cannot afford the careless moment. We take vacations but we never go off-duty spiritually. Jesus is our Savior and Lord *all the time*, or we cannot stay in the Kingdom.

That might sound grim to some people. That is Good News – Gospel, Light and Life – to me. I do hope it is for you as well.