

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time  
I KINGS 8:1, 6, 10-11), 22-30, 41-43  
PSALM 84  
EPHESIANS 6:10-20  
JOHN 6:56-69  
August 18, 2024

### ***A Metaphor Gone Awry!***

**“Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war! With the cross of Jesus going on before!” Many of us grew up singing that song with all the gusto and bravado we could muster, soldiers of Christ ready to wage war, to go into battle to defeat a host of enemies, mostly focusing on those thought to be heretics and/or pagans. Or, how about “I Am on the Battlefield for My Lord,” with the chorus “I am on the battlefield for my Lord. I’m on the battlefield for my Lord, and I promised Him that I would serve Him ‘til I die; I’m on the battlefield for my Lord.”<sup>1</sup> Or this, from “Soldiers in the Army,” “We are soldiers, soldiers in the army. We have to fight. Lord knows we have to try. We have to hold up the bloodstained banner. We have to hold it up until we die.”<sup>2</sup> I thought about us singing one of them and then I thought better of it! These songs were and are meant to convey positive images, but reveal a dark side, a reminder of the warring past that has afflicted Christendom for generations. Third generation Christians, unlike their first and second versions, were willing to fight at all costs, to annihilate, to vanquish, any and all comers, foes who dared embrace the devil by choosing to join the ranks of the wrong side, yes, to side with Satan, you know, that mythical nonexistent being. Every battle was a battle to end all battles, a repetitive fallacy the world sadly has come to expect with every new manifestation of war! We have learned to roll our eyes and roll with the punches! Literally!**

**Early and later Christians reveled in the idea that they were doing spiritual warfare as if on a Blues Brothers mission from God. Boldly, bravely, they took on all enemies, fighting against those foes real and imagined, prayer warriors who fought the good fight, believing, knowing, that God was on their side, meaning therefore, that God was not with and on the side of their adversaries, an untold number of enemies, legions of various stripes. The enemies of God were ubiquitous, always thought to be lurking**

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas B. Slater, “Ephesians”, in *Smyth & Helwys Commentary*, (Macon, GA: 2012, 172.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

around every corner. Some, still today, continue to follow that sordid tradition! And sadly, these militaristic, these warring, images were all conceived by those who wrote epic narratives that eventually became the Bible, the good book, a book of books that in and of itself proved to be the source of even more warring madness, encouraging, cheering on the insanity of it all. The stories of faith we have read and cherished since childhood, believing the biblical narrative to be something special, have frequently been quoted, employed to defend our militaristic tendencies. Some of the faithful, however, have even ramped up the outrage, taking these battle images to the next level, believing the Bible as the “inspired”, literal, inerrant, infallible word, with a capital “W”, of God, further advancing this mentality, fully endorsed, adding more fuel to the raging fires of discord and discontent. Yes, many of the words in scripture are fighting words! What was probably, no doubt, an innocent seed planted centuries ago before it became holy writ, devolved into watchwords spawning vitriol and violence, advocating conversion and conquest, demanding retribution, the Crusades and the Inquisition quintessential examples tainting our oft inconsistent and hypocritical ecclesial history. These notable blights have left a stain, a permanent scar on Christendom, creating a toxic paradigm for the future, establishing a horrific legacy which continues to pollute and poison the groundwater of the Church, the faith handed down to us by our original peaceful forebears in the faith. As we have learned from our history, the conversion of the emperor Constantine and his Christianization of the Roman Empire, soon to be Holy Roman Empire, in 312 CE, while making Christianity an acceptable religion in the empire, spurred the rapidly institutionalization of Christendom, thrusting the faith toward dominance, the defeat of foes now stamped with divine justice, a source of civic and Christian pride. The scourge of warring madness can never be fully leached from the bloodied soil of those who have been victimized, excised, from the foundations of our faith, a sad memorial by the saints slaughtered by zealots who embraced and even reveled in the dark side of our ecclesial history. **It is impossible and unacceptable to forget the past as we try to make sense of it, learn from it, and find peace, pun intended, with it.**

**In our Witness from the Epistles in the anonymous letter to the church at Ephesus, the book of Ephesians reinforces, even if innocently, subtly so, gives tacit permission and promotion, the blessing, of military imagery as a perfectly fitting, totally normal, analogy for these early followers of Christ. Indeed, this text represents a metaphor gone awry! It is no surprise that we read of the glorification of bloody hostilities simply because the Hebrew Bible, in certain specific stories called *Herem* texts, part of the legacy, the sadder part, of our Jewish forebears, at least on occasion honored**

these kinds of divinely blessed conflagrations. As we know from our readings, conquest was often a good thing, a sign of blessing, the spoils of war gloriously seized at the end of a spear and sword, relishing a well-earned victor's purse, rape and pillage the fortunes of war enjoyed by the winners. What began, was written, as good, a theological idea being efficacious, that would be salvific (salvation) in nature, a battle against a perceived Satanic figure representing evil, turned bad quickly in both external and internal fighting, unfortunately going strong ever since. These words from Ephesians were written to put a different spin on the Roman armament, matching battlefield protection and weaponry with peaceful images such as a belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness and justice, shoes worthy of one spreading good news of peace, and of course, a shield of faith and a helmet of salvation. None of these items are useful in war, are helpful in battle! While the historical man from Nazareth, that would be Jesus, was no longer around in the flesh to read this stuff, I can only imagine that he would have been rolling in his tomb had he remained in one. The rabbi, poster child of peace, purveyor of harmony and unity, this passionate lover of peace, would have never put his stamp of approval, his personal and rabbinic imprimatur, on anything that even remotely advocated for war despite the early Church putting that kind of language in his mouth, forcing him in hindsight, in retrospect, in the rearview mirror, with no other option than to advocate for a sword, to embrace these warring images! And that is exactly what the Gospel writers did! And to be perfectly candid, after all, the early Church, as it endured the hardships placed upon its constituents by the Roman legions, certainly made Jesus guilty by association as they put words in his mouth, purported quotes that we read in the Gospels that appear to make him complicit, in support of warrior vernacular. Jesus, as we know, was accused of taking part in sedition, sounds frighteningly familiar, and was executed as a common criminal for instigating an insurrection, though no evidence was ever presented as proof of any conspiratorial leanings. Of course, the dead or ascended never have any control, any say, in what they are claimed to have said, no defense whatsoever. We read in the Gospel of Matthew (10:34-36), but the same alarming, disturbing, text can also be found in Luke (12:51-53; 14:26-27), words never spoken but attributed to Jesus, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth! I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And one's foes will be members of one's own household." Yikes! Crikey! What gives? Well, do not fret dear children of God, do not be alarmed, because Jesus never uttered those words even if he might have thought them in numerous moments of frustration and even anger. At the time the Gospels were written, the early Church was in the midst of schism, a final

breakup, a split between traditional Jews and the sectarian followers of Jesus, the system no longer able to sustain their fragile relationship. Between what was rapidly becoming two distinct religious groups, diverse entities moving further apart by the day. As with the civil war that afflicted our own country, there was anxiety and strife taking place within many faithful families, a wedge created, forced into the family dynamic, a rift between those who embraced the Jesus movement and those who found it too radical, a stretch too far in their religious imagination, perhaps even thought this Jesus stuff to be heretical to some degree, a perversion of the ancient faith. These divisions were painful and permanent and what we now read reflects that reality, not in any way whatsoever a real time record of the musings espoused by the Prince of Peace.

The writer of Ephesians waxes poetic, using stark militaristic imagery that would have been easily recognizable to these earliest Christians. The Roman military was outfitted with all the splendid regalia, proudly wearing defensive and offensive equipment designed to meet whatever immediate need came their way. They constantly were breathing down the throats of those early followers of the way, threatening them with bodily harm, persecution, terror and torture, and of course, martyrdom, excruciatingly cruel deaths wrought by a whole host of horrific means, often for the entertainment of the ravenous Roman citizenry. Folks let's be honest, there are some images that cannot be rehabilitated, that cannot be perfumed in a way that makes them acceptable, redeemable, suitable. Despite the fact that this verbiage is found in the Bible and vainly seeks to convey a positive, uplifting, message, in the final analysis these words are damaging, detrimental to the common good, reminders of the horrors of war, of the lack of peace on earth and good will to all persons, the very things that need leaching out of our lives and out of our world. I am amazed, that after all these years of analysis, of looking back on the painful and forgettable parts of our Christian past, that there is still an element that celebrates, that rejoices and revels, in these skirmishes, these escalating escapades, as proof that our faith is better than, that our religion is good while others is bad, and closer to home, that our ecclesiology and theology, in other words, our way of being and doing church and our way of believing, of exercising, practicing, our faith, our spirituality, is right and any other is wrong. Yes, these warring planks paved the foundations for fighting, intractable positions always leading to either violent actions or stalemates based on an inability to have crosscultural conversations, the always necessary communication that builds bridges while tearing down walls, creating not just détente between opposing parties, a mere managing of polarities, but building the cornerstones for peace, lasting peace.

And yet, despite the fact that I, and perhaps many, if not most, of us, wish that warring images had never been written, allowed, shoved, into the fabric of the Bible, these writings we now hold so dear, even regard as holy, perhaps these presumably sacred words can still be salvaged, returned to their original peaceful purpose, allegorical swords turned into plowshares, speaking a cogent, salient, word for our time, speaking above the fray in these turbulent times, voicing a prophet word of sanity and warning in our contemporary, postmodern, settings. Once again, our goal is to take what originally was intended as a positive, life-giving, metaphor, but was turned into something that could very well be described as demonic, to misuse an overused term, and flip the script once more to see a way forward with this fighting language. We are called to take this destructive armament, and interpret it in a new but old light, to understand these ancient images as they originally were conceived, as a fight for what is right, for common sense, a fight for social justice, a fight for those who cannot fight alone, those who live on the fringes, the dispossessed and disenfranchised, the marginalized, all of whom were given special attention by Jesus, hospitably welcomed and embraced, invited and included at his grand party called the Great Banquet Feast. Indeed, Jesus constantly fought for their rights, for their very survival, their very personhood. This country, our country, has waged many battles of many kinds, some good, some not so much. But on the positive scale, we have waged and won the war against slavery, fought to create the inalienable rights in the civil rights movement, fought for the rights of women and the LGBTQQIA+ community, for the differently abled, and the inherent equality that all people deserve. At the core of our being we know that these struggles for fairness, these battles are just and righteous, mandated, demanded, by the God who created all people equally and in the divine image. Yes, to misquote Kamala Harris, when we fight these fights, we win! Every time! All the time! To paraphrase the words of the writer of I Timothy, we want to fight the good fight, yes, to cause some “good trouble” as the late John Lewis called it. When all our battles are finished, the tests, trials, and tribulations of this life, victories won and lost, are all complete and the book on our lives is closed, may it be said of us that we indeed “fought the good fight!” Yes, emphasis on good! As the writer of Ephesians noted to those who first read these fighting words, “We are not fighting against human enemies, but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens,” all metaphorical speak for the evils that continually challenge us, threaten to diminish our humanity, and haunt our world.

**Today, our battles are clearly on the surface, obvious, transparent in every way. There are battles for the right of a woman to have control and destiny over her body, the right for an individual to marry who they love knowing that love is love, the battle to allow parents to decide which books their children read, the battle against climate change knowing that global warming will be the demise of us all if it is not contained, the battle for affordable health care, and yes, the battle for democracy. Yes, you can be Christian and support these causes. Yes, you can be Christian and oppose them. And yes, I am aware of where most of us land on these issues, might as well name that reality. At the end of the day, we best fight by faith and not by sight, the grace of God guiding us, but doing our dead level best to make sure that our fights do not destroy us, that we are honest, authentic, genuine in our concerns, that we find ways to disagree without being disagreeable, that we acknowledge that we have differences and that we have indeed chosen sides, acknowledging that fortunately and unfortunately there are sides. Whatever sides those sides may be, we hope, we pray, that when the dust settles after any of our skirmishes, we all live to fight again, diligently searching for common ground, to find ways forward that serve the common good and the good that is somewhere, sometimes hidden, but definitely within us all! As we live and move and have our being, our integrity is always at stake with every move we make!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and calls us to fight the good fight, the fight for all the things reflected in the life of Jesus. Amen and amen!**