

Preaching is a challenging, exciting, frustrating, empowering, ominous, awesome calling. A wise colleague, named Debra Berg, once said to me that preaching was her spiritual discipline – reading the scriptures and pondering what they meant for her life and the life of the community – was the way she nurtured her spirit. I fully agree. Last week I shared with you the “big picture” of the God I have come to know over the decades. I chose to do that in part because it was a good starting point for our relationship and in part because the lectionary – the appointed readings for last Sunday – described King Solomon’s assassination of his adversaries – hardly the grist for an inaugural sermon.

This week I returned to the lectionary where I discovered today’s reading from St. Paul to the Ephesians. At first, this reading appeared as antiquated and irrelevant as Solomon’s saga. It’s reference to “the wiles of the devil” and the “helmet of salvation” seemed obtuse to the modern mind. Yet, it is the preacher’s task to ponder such passages to see if they contain wisdom for our lives. As I sat with this passage the wisdom became more evident. Over the years I have learned a three step technique for examining scripture. (first slide) The first step is to let the passage simply speak its story ... or what might be called the “face value” reading. The second step is to attempt to understand what its message meant to its

original readers ... what might be called “the local story.” The final step is to ask if there are any parallels with our own experience ... is there any “enduring wisdom?” I applied this method to today’s passage.

The face value reading details Paul’s view that people of faith are in a battle with the forces of evil. (Next slide) He uses words like “wiles of the devil,” “cosmic powers of darkness,” and “spiritual forces of evil” to describe the dangers that threaten people of faith. He tells his listeners that they must protect themselves from these threats by arming themselves with the belt of truth, the shield of faith and the sword of the spirit.

The “local story” confirms that the little bands of Christians were threatened at every turn. They were rejected by their Jewish kin and lived in a land occupied by a foreign army, not unlike France during the Second World War. In that context of occupation, betrayal and oppression were rampant. Who could you trust? And how do you resist the propaganda that attempts to shape your view of the world? Christians were members of the resistance. They resisted the theocracy of Judaism; they resisted the idea that the Roman emperor was God; and they resisted the propaganda that the way to prosperity was to align with the powers of oppression. Paul suggests that this little band of Christians “arm themselves” not with literal swords and shields but with ideas, with faith, with truth, with gospel.

Throughout the ages, wise leaders have known that ultimately ideas, not weapons; faith, not the sword; undermines and defeats oppressive powers.

And so we come to the final stage of inquiry **(Next slide)** – asking if this passage has any enduring wisdom? Is oppression still at work in our world? Are there “cosmic powers” or prevailing propaganda that fuels oppression? Are we as church, as people of faith, still called to speak gospel to darkness and truth to power?

In the same way that the Romans sowed dissent among the people and groomed attitudes that perpetuated oppression, we continue to live in a world where certain attitudes and ideologies threaten God’s enterprise of love. Each of you will have your own list of love-threatening ideologies.

(show slide) For today I wish to name three attitudes which might be defined as “powers of darkness” or “forces of evil.” It is my perception that our culture is beset by ‘the seduction of entitlement,’ ‘the myth of scarcity,’ and ‘the veneration of individualism.’

Entitlement is defined as, “the belief that one is inherently deserving of privilege.” There was a news report circulating a few weeks ago about a confrontation between a Caucasian man and a seemingly Islamic family in a Hamilton parking lot. The video shows an individual shouting “Go back to

your own country” to which the Islamic man replies, “This is my country, I am a Canadian citizen.” “I don’t believe you,” counters the perpetrator, “Prove it. You don’t talk like a Canadian.” This short exchange, which included slurs and heated emotions ends with the perpetrator threatening to harm the family’s children. It reveals the assumption that only if one’s ancestors settled this land are you entitled to call yourselves Canadians. It assumes that the way of life we have known is, by default, the best way to live. We presume that others must adapt to our food, our cultural values, our religion. Entitlement is insidious. It shows itself in many areas of life from the way those in the service industry are treated to the belief by the affluent that they should be able to jump the queue for medical treatment. Is it possible to challenge the plague of entitlement with the gospel value of gratitude? Psalm 136 invites us to, “Give thanks to God always.” Can we counter entitlement with gratitude? What if that Hamilton perpetrator, rather than expending energy on rage, spent that energy being grateful for the gift of living in Canada? Rather than issuing demands to store clerks and servers what if one focuses on being grateful for the ability to purchase goods or dine out?

Sometimes the entitlement attitude is linked to the idea of scarcity, the belief that there isn’t enough to go around. I recently heard of a rural

community where the local 7-11 was employing new immigrants. Rather than celebrating new people in the community or the recognizing the growing tax base, coffee row complained that jobs were being lost to “foreigners”. The myth of scarcity suggests that “they” will take “our” jobs. My father died when I was eleven. I learned, years later, that at the time of my Dad’s death our family’s worldly wealth amounted to \$200. Even in 1965, \$200 didn’t represent much more than one month’s income, yet I had no sense that we were poor. We had a home and a vehicle and although summer trips were few, there were picnics in the park, Sunday suppers with grandparents, and presents under the tree at Christmas. Over the years I have accumulated thousands more dollars than that of my parents, yet I can still be preoccupied by thoughts of scarcity. Walter Bruggeman, a prominent Hebrew Bible scholar writes:

... as we grow more and more wealthy, money is becoming a kind of narcotic ... we hardly notice our own prosperity ... the great contradiction is that we have more and more money and are less and less generous – less public money for the needy and less charity for the neighbour.”

Is it possible to challenge the plague of scarcity with the gospel value of generosity? When the widow contributes out of her scarcity a single coin to the common good Jesus declares that her faithfulness is an example to all. The Huffington Post recently reported: “more and more studies are

highlighting the benefits of generosity ... not only does generosity reduce stress (and) enhance one's sense of purpose ... it (actually increases) one's lifespan."

The final plague is that of individualism, which the dictionary defines as "favouring the self over the collective." I am not arguing that we should abandon our own needs for in Jesus' command to love the neighbour is the corollary to love ourselves. Self-affirmation and self-care are legitimate pursuits; yet, our culture encourages us to not only love ourselves but to elevate the self above all others. Individual needs and desires are deemed paramount. The past ethicist at St. Paul's Hospital lamented that "autonomy" had risen to the top of the ethical hierarchy in treating patients. Concerns for one's family, consideration of resource distribution and even the recommendations of the doctor were to be overridden by a focus on patient's rights. In a bizarre example of individualism Dutch and German newspapers reported that a woman went before the local magistrate to recognize her decision to marry herself. She promised to love, honour and obey herself explaining, "we live in a me society, hence it is logical that one promises to be faithful to oneself."

The folding of cooperatives and decreased participation in community groups is a consequence of individualism. Research in the US revealed

that participation in all forms of community organizations has declined over 25% in the last decade and is still diminishing. The authors identified a phenomenon they described as “checkbook members” – those whose participation in community groups was limited to writing a cheque.

Is it possible to challenge the plague of individualism with the gospel value of community? Community is inherent in our understanding of Trinity, the idea that God is a communal relationship. From the communal nature of the Lord’s Supper to the mandate to be our brother and sisters keeper Christianity is not an individual pursuit.

St. Paul used terms like the “cosmic powers of darkness” to describe insidious ideas that threaten the commonwealth of God. Let us, in our time and place, put on the breastplate of gratefulness, the shield of generosity, and the commitment to community as acts of faithfulness in God, the power of love. Amen.