

Year B, Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16)

August 22, 2021

The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but... against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

As you can imagine, I wasn't very happy sending out that email on Friday about how we here at St. Francis are responding to this fourth surge of COVID. I can't imagine anyone was too thrilled receiving it. If you missed it we are making a few adjustments around here: we're laying aside coffee hour for now; our annual meeting next week will be very brief, no luncheon, virtually no presentations (please read the annual reports and bring questions that are best addressed as a group); in-person formation offerings (Sunday school, Adult Forum and Wednesday Seekers) which were going to get started in September are on hold – we're discussing online options; and while we are singing for now, if the county bumps up one level on the CDC transmission map to “high” (we've currently at “substantial”), we will cease singing. Some other parishes are suspending singing already, but then again they are not requiring vaccination for attendance so gathering here is less risky. We are not talking about reverting to Zoom-only yet, but some religious bodies are. Rest assured that we will continue to follow the guidance of government officials and our Diocese.

How are you feeling in this moment? What is going on inside for you? \_\_\_\_\_ I was trying to imagine what you all might say and found myself going through the variety of emotional experiences I am having in all of this. I feel angry. I feel resentful, nervous, annoyed. I am weary, weary of vigilance. I feel powerless to change anything or anyone. (I really don't like that feeling). Sometimes I feel like pretending that it isn't that bad, that we're blowing this out of proportion, that we are overreacting. (We're not, but sometimes I wish we were). I want to say “the heck with it” and go out to dinner like we always have. I feel sad for children, what they have gone/are going/will go through; school is going to be weird again, God willing it will be safe. I feel sad for people for whom these are their last days that these are their last days. What a lousy send off. Did I mention feeling angry? Angry at people continuing to resist vaccination, angry at elected officials for putting politics over public safety, angry at pundits for putting profit and popularity over responsible journalism (ie telling the truth)... angry because we could have beaten this but for fearfulness or lack of selflessness by far too many. Freedom isn't free. Sometimes you need to sacrifice for the whole. Get your shot.

Did a brief rundown of my inner reactions to the 4<sup>th</sup> surge bring any more up for you?

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“For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but... against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” St. Paul or pseudo-Paul (remember, we’re not sure who wrote the letter to the church in Ephesus) is right on the money here. Our current situation is a perfect illustration of his thinking.

The virus is an enemy of blood and flesh. It is a physical, tangible problem. Organizational behavior folks like Ron Heifetz at Harvard Business School (who is pretty popular in church circles) call this a technical problem. There are physical, technical solutions to the problem of pandemics. Vaccines are a perfect example; they end pandemics. Other technical solutions include behavior modification such as reducing exposure, physical distancing, wearing masks, building and maintaining a resilient public health system to which everyone has access.

This is pretty straight forward. Think back to the temperance movement: alcohol was a scourge on the nation, so the temperance people decided that banning alcohol would be a solution. It was a technical solution, top down, driven by experts all of that. Did it work? Well for a couple of years drinking was reduced, but quickly it increased. By the time the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment (the Prohibition Amendment) was rescinded, drinking levels were the same as prior to the amendment and we had an entrenched infrastructure of organized crime in this country. The problem of alcohol, the real problem, like that of the virus, like that which faced the people in Ephesus was not/is not a static problem solvable from on high, unsolvable by technical, expertise led change. Human beings, human behavior, human nature is involved. That takes a whole different level of change.

Paul called the struggles that his friends in Ephesus were facing struggles against rulers and authorities, “the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” These are problems of the human spirit. The vaccine ends the virus: that is technical, that is simple. Getting people to take the vaccine, to prioritize the other over the self, the we over me ... now that is a wholly different issue. That is a moral issues, a spiritual issue, an issue of how we understand who we are in relation to each other and how we are (or are not) responsible for the well-being if not salvation of the whole.

The organizational behavior term for the way forward in the murky waters ahead is adaptive. We need adaptive solutions. Adaptive change is dynamic, wholistic, systematic, and structural because simple technical solutions rarely fit nicely on human, organic systems. If they did, everyone

would have been vaccinated as soon as they could have been (a clear technical solution) and the pandemic would be over here and we could help the rest of the world solve it, too. That has not happened and here we are, surge 4.0.

Heifetz et al. offer guiding principles for leading adaptive change. We need to see the big picture. We need to confront “brutal facts.” Adaptive change calls for us to regulate distress, challenge unproductive norms and ask questions rather than give answers. (Or as Douglas Addams teaches in *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, “Don’t panic.”). We must maintain disciplined attention, keeping focus on tough issues to keep from backsliding because, well, we’re human, and we need to focus or we’ll revert to what we are comfortable with. We need to give the work back to the people, help more people accept responsibility for collective success, and instill confidence that it is possible to be part of the change. And lastly, we need to actually hear all voices, and protect those who risk speaking up.

Our most important struggle, as a nation, and certainly as a church, is not a technical one against a virus, it is not struggle against the enemies of blood and flesh. Heroes of science and public health have already accomplished that. The pandemic isn’t over because our struggle is within, and in that we do have a thing or two to offer. This is a spiritual battle, and Paul’s image of putting on the armor of God is, a bit militant, but apt.

The whole armor of God, as Paul describes it, is an exercise of resilience. There’s a word of extreme importance in the time of pandemics and climate change. If we take on God in Christ, take God into our hearts, onto our tongues, we will be capable of withstanding that evil day, we will be able to “stand firm.” And how? There is likely not a one-to-one link between each piece of Paul’s armor of God to a relevant point in adaptive change theory, but that is not what is really important. Paul’s commentary is right there in keeping with the spirit of modern social science (or vice versa).

What is important is that we gird ourselves with truth. Truth will set us free, free from attachments to worldly things, aversion to things heavenly and delusions about the true nature of things. What is important is that we take on righteousness, right at our core. We need to be morally right, morally justifiable, regardless of personal preferences, regardless of how inconvenient, unpleasant or scary it might be. The breastplate of righteousness can be boiled down to the simple question, “I am in line with the great commandment? Am I loving God and loving my Neighbor?”

We need to do whatever we need to do to proclaim the gospel of peace. How do we become a non-anxious presence in the world? How do we engage with those on different or wrong paths, constructively?

The shield of faith quenching the flaming arrows of the evil one? This is about staying safe, physically, yes, but morally, mentally and spiritually, too. Self-doubt, life-long lessons urging going-along-to-get-along, conflict avoidance, passive aggressiveness... we must shield ourselves from these attacks from within as much as we must shield ourselves from doubts cultivated in accusations of hysteria, of being snowflakes, of being “sheep-le.”

“Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” I take this to mean hold onto the promises of Christ. This is faith that we are in the world but not of the world. That yes, our bodies may break, our breath may fail, but our souls are in the hand of the everliving God and all will be well, all will be well, every manner of thing will be well, if not in this life, then in the fullness of time to be sure. All is perishing. All is vanity. Great is the mystery of faith.

And how? Heifetz has a bunch of books on how to lead adaptive change. That is one path. Paul’s path for us is a bit more apropos, though it is the narrower path. Prayer and supplication. Align your being, your desires and needs with the being of God in Christ with the Holy Spirit. Make supplication, that is beg earnestly to God, be fully present with what you need, and that will align your course with Reality with a big R. And keep alert. That might be Paul’s best direction here, keep your heart and mind and body alert for the not just the hazards that lay right below the surface, but for the still small voice whispering the Word of God to you. God speaks in sighs too deep for words, the creation groans as in birth pangs, and you have the ears to hear it. Listen!

We have a hard time ahead of us, again or still. We are weary, most of us. Disheartened. Frustrated. Angry. \_\_\_\_\_ But what are we supposed to do? We need to be like the disciples when they said to Jesus, “Lord, to whom can we go?” We have been given the truth of God, we can’t walk away from it. And though it is a hard path, one requiring the armor of God to make it through, it is the path to freedom, freedom from the pandemic and other enemies of blood and flesh, and freedom from the graver threats to our spirits, threats such as fear, darkness and evil. This, our situation right now is not how anyone would want it. But it is how it is. Thanks be to God that our faith offers another path. AMEN