

Peacemaking: The Beautiful Fight of the Faith
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The title for today's lecture is taken from 1 Timothy 6:12 which reads: "*Fight the good fight of the faith*; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. (NRSV)"

I already know that the title I've chosen is strange for a speech to those interested in and committed to the idea of making peace. Yet it is important that we all recognize that peace making, by its very nature, involves introducing tension into the lives of stress-filled people and structures, governments, agencies and institutions. As peace makers we are called and sent by God into places where antagonists are already at one another's throats. Once there, we are to engage in a struggle, a veritable fight that is different in kind. It is a fight that is not ugly, and rancorous, and destructive of human life. It is a fight that is beautiful, and merciful, and restorative.

Peace making is a beautiful fight because it is the constant personal struggle to embody and to do the will of God for God's glory and for the good of the human family. Peace making is a beautiful fight because it places the emissaries of God's Christ in the middle of the war between good and evil, God and the evil one. Peace making is a beautiful fight because it endeavors to reconcile warring factions, heal wounded combatants, and redeem lost souls via the power of God's Spirit.

When the pseudonymous writer of First Timothy first penned the words "*Fight the beautiful fight of the faith*" during the third generation of the Church's life, he did so in the context of offering pastoral instructions to Timothy, one of the Apostle Paul's most faithful co-laborers in the gospel of God through Christ Jesus. Apparently there were those in the church and in the broader society during those times who were more concerned about their own welfare than they were about the welfare of the masses of people. There were even Christian leaders at that time who lusted for money, engaged in vain or empty arguments about words, and who believed that "*gain was godliness.*" The writer of this epistle counseled Timothy, whose name means "one who honors God", to eschew such attitudes and behaviors; to seek rather to embody such virtues as righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience and meekness. I came to assert that all people who honor God must see these virtues as the moral commitments and attitudes needed to successfully engage *the beautiful fight of the faith*.

The Roman Empire of Timothy's day accumulated wealth and acquired power by waging war against weaker nations – a process which required the unmitigated use of

violence. It controlled the means of production and the distribution of resources. And it manipulated and controlled public opinion through the use of various media. That was the nature of Empires then and that is the nature of empires now. Say what you will. From my vantage point the behavior of Empires demand a set of moral commitments from their citizens that are contrary to those set forth in such lofty documents as the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, the Sermon on the Mount, those listed in 1st Timothy 6:12, and the ideas expressed in Martin King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary Empire is *"a political unit having an extensive territory or comprising a number of territories or nations and ruled by a single supreme authority."*¹ In today's parlance an Empire is a superpower. Rome was the superpower of its day just as America is the superpower of our day.

Empires, like the Reigndom of God, are spiritual entities. They are comprised of a complex web of individuals, institutions, agencies, structures, policies and programs that together, both create and sustain them.² The Apostle Paul was using coded language to talk about Empire when, in the sixth chapter of Ephesians he wrote:

*"For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. **Ephesians 6:12**^{NRS}"*

In their book *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*, Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther describe the spirituality of empire in terms of "cognitive coherence" and "imperial culture." They write quote:

"It is the cultural realm that provides cognitive coherence to the entire range of practices, structures, and relationships that constitute a given society. That is, we make sense of our society by the way in which our culture presents itself to us. This presentation' they say 'may be official or unofficial. It makes use of the totality of available media, and it may be packaged with much solemnity or as mere entertainment. The way the cultural code is presented tends to make the prevailing social arrangements seem the natural order of things. The culture says to us: the way things are is the way things should be, in accordance with the "divine" will."³ End quote.

Patriotism and religion are so tightly commingled in Empires that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. Daring to speak or act against the Empire or any of its entities, policies, or clients is tantamount to transgressing the will of God in the minds

¹ American Heritage Dictionary

² See Walter Wink's Power Series

³ Howard-Brook, Wes and Gwyther, Anthony, Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), p. 101.

of many people. There is therefore a sense in which the Empire becomes god for those who fail to discern both the subtle and the not so subtle ways in which Empire co-opts the consciousness.

Since when did war become the will of Christ? Where in the teaching of Jesus do we read that material wealth is the evidence of God's blessing? Did he not tell the rich young ruler to go sell all that he had? When did being "born again" become a prerequisite for becoming the President of the United States of America? Where and when did Jesus ever teach that it was appropriate to seal borders against your neighbors seeking jobs that paid enough to feed their hungry families? In which gospel did Jesus tell us to reject homosexuals and condemn them to hell? Where did Jesus tell the church to judge others on the basis of their observable behavior? I for one do not give the Apostle Paul the same authority as Jesus. While the Apostle Paul did in fact reproach those engaging in homosexual behavior, he had much more to say against the behavior of the fornicator and the adulterer. Why are we not seeking to prevent fornicators and adulterers access to ordination with at least as much energy and contempt as those who profess being gay and lesbian? If the truth be told, if we, the church of Jesus the Christ, held the Apostle Paul in as much esteem as we do Jesus, then women would not even have a voice in our congregations. The point I'm driving at is that it is not so much the teachings of scripture or the words of Christ that are behind the meanness and madness evident in our churches today, as it is the ideology of a self-proclaimed born again president and the self-proclaimed, born- again oil men and women in his cabinet and administration. The commingling of patriotism with a particularly strident, if not extremist form of Christianity has brought far too many well meaning Christian people to the conclusion that conservative political ideology is identical to the word of God. Where are the virtues the writer of First Timothy counseled Timothy to practice? Where are the virtues of righteousness, godliness, love, faith, patience and meekness to be found in the Christian Church in America? Prayerfully, they are found in the hearts and minds and bodies of peace makers.

I don't want to be accused of being too anecdotal or emotional so let me refer you to a wonderfully well researched and written book by Kevin Phillips. The book is entitled *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century*. Kevin Phillips was a Republican strategist during the Nixon administration. In chapter one of his book, Phillips persuasively argues that there is, and has always been, a direct connection between fuel and national power – not just in American history, but in the history of the world. In chapter four which is entitled "*Radicalized Religion*" Phillips both carefully documents the role of religion in the building and maintenance of American Empire and demonstrates the way in which the Southern Baptist Convention with its attendant fundamentalist and premillennialist doctrines has slowly but surely won the hearts and minds of nearly sixty percent of the American Christian population regardless of their denominational affiliations. Now combine these two well documented theories with what you know about virtually every Presidential administration since Jimmy Carter who, I believe, was the first American

president in the 20th century to publicly identify as a “born again” Christian. Continue thinking about the strategic geographical locations of such places as Israel, Iraq, and Iran then look at American foreign policy in regard to those nations. I hope that you can see with me that American foreign and domestic policies, are at least in part, driven by a literal reading of the scriptures ala the Southern Baptist Convention along with various Pentecostal Denominations, and the need to maintain superpower or imperial status through the control of existing oil reserves.

Just as ancient Rome accumulated wealth and acquired power by waging war against weaker nations; just as it controlled the means of production and the distribution of resources; and just as Rome manipulated and controlled public opinion through the use of various media, so also does the empire we call America. I know that this is difficult to listen to but I want you to be assured that I stand here not to condemn America. Rather I am standing here to inform fellow citizens of the Reigndom of God that America is not synonymous with the Reigndom of God and God's Christ. We are mere ambassadors of Christ who are on a time-filled journey from earth's sorrow to heaven's joy. And as we take this journey we are supposed to *fight the beautiful fight of the faith* by embodying righteousness, godliness, love, faith, patience, and meekness. We called to respect earthly authority because, according to the Apostle Paul, “all authority comes from God. (Romans 16:1)” While respecting earthly authority however we are to serve God and God alone. And there are times when the will of our God is in conflict with the values, programs, policies, and covenants of Empire.

On September 15, 1963 the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that sits just a few blocks away from where we are now sitting was fire bombed. Four young girls were killed while changing into their choir robes in the basement of the church and twenty innocent Birmingham citizens were injured. Apparently, the Ku Klux Klan felt the need to strike a blow against the Civil Rights Movement and for de facto segregation. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was the leader of the Civil Rights Movement did not counsel Afrikan Americans to return violence with violence or to meet hatred with hatred. Rather, he forthrightly pressed his program of non-violent resistance against the governing authority as well as the structures, agencies and programs that endeavored to keep racial segregation in tact. That's peace making! That's an example of the embodiment of the righteousness, godliness, love, faith, patience and meekness that the writer of First Timothy says that those who honor God ought to practice.

As I come near the close of this speech, I want you to know that there is something far more dangerous than empire with us in the world. It too is a spiritual entity and it wields far greater influence than empire ever could. Howard-Brook and Gwyther call it “global capital.”⁴

⁴ Ibid., p. 237.

The phrase "global capital" is intended to capture the phenomenon observable as we watch the movements of transnational corporations. Unlike their predecessors, which were called multinational corporations, transnational corporations seek not to adjust to local governmental policies, but to force local governments to adapt to their demands. This phenomenon can best be seen when we, tax paying citizens, stand idly by as our tax dollars are used to attract large corporations to our communities. Where at one time corporations submitted to the policy standards of local governments; now local governments are submitting to the demands of huge corporations for tax breaks, infrastructure and the like. In short, there is no public control of transnational corporations.

Quoting journalist William Greider, Howard-Brook and Gwyther write: "*Respectable opinion is now enthralled by the secular faith [in the market] . . . This faith has attained almost religious certitude.*"⁵

Quoting David Korten, a former senior advisor to the United States Agency for International Development and member of the faculty of the Harvard Graduate Business School, they go on to say, "*free-market ideology has been embraced around the world with the fervor of a fundamentalist religious faith. . . . the economics profession serves as its priesthood to question its doctrine has become virtual heresy.*"⁶ The dogmas proclaimed by the priesthood, says Korten are:

1. *"Economic growth is the only path to human progress.*
2. *Unrestrained free markets are the best mode of trade.*
3. *Economic globalization is beneficial to almost all.*
4. *Privatization improves efficiency.*
5. *The primary role of government is to protect property rights and contracts.*"⁷

Global Capital is a far more dangerous threat to human life, especially human life that exists at the bottom of the worlds social and economic wells, than Empire ever was. It has already set the stage for a radically violent destruction of human life while in pursuit of capital gain. Perhaps the most recent and well known example of this pursuit is Enron. And the question for those of us who honor God is "what are the things that make for peace in the face of such overwhelming power?"

Well, remember that we are the children of the God who created the heavens and the earth and who has all power. And if I can use the words of the Apostle Paul a bit out of context, "*Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; ⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds.*" 2 Corinthians 10:3 -4

The virtues that are listed in First Timothy 6:12 – righteousness, godliness, love, faith, patience and meekness – are the moral commitments and attitudes that we must

⁵ Ibid., p. 238.

⁶ Ibid., p. 238.

⁷ Ibid., p. 238.

embody to resist the encroachment of empire and global capital. Taken together, they comprise a posture in the world that is simultaneously against the spirits of empire and global capital and for God and God's creation.

Taking a stand for God and God's creation regardless of what, or who, or where it or they are is a dangerous proposition indeed. In fact, it can get you killed because Empire and global capital take no prisoners. The moral commitments of those who honor God must be coupled with implements of the kind of warfare to which we have all been called – our feet must be shod with the proclamation of the gospel of peace; on our heads we must wear the helmet of salvation; our loins must be girt about with truth; our sword is the word of God and our shield is faith. With these lowly implements we are sent by a loving God to confront a hostile world to make peace.

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