

Palm Sunday
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

March 20, 2016
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The Epic Conflict

One time a good many years ago I was walking in pristine Amazon jungle in eastern Ecuador. I noticed a subtle noise in the jungle, different from the birds calling and the gentle breeze in the treetops 200 ft. above me. It was as if the air itself were alive with clickings, shufflings and gentle thumpings. I looked down, and it was as I feared. Army ants were swarming across my path. If I were not careful they would try to carry me away with them—or so it always feels in this situation. I also noticed that there was more than one kind of ant on the trail. Two different colonies of army ants were swarming, and they had run into one another. They were just close enough in niche to feel like the other group was a threat to their territory. What I was hearing was a between two armies of perhaps half a million members were duking it out around my feet. I figured the better part of valor was to leave that part of the jungle to them.

Besides army ants, other animal conflict is well documented. Chimpanzees live in troops in the Central African rainforest. Occasionally one of them goes a bit AWOL and starts to attack the young of the troop. The rest of them gang up on the miscreant and either require submission, drive them out, or kill them.

We know conflict most poignantly however, among humans. Today we begin the great story of an epic conflict. We celebrated it as we began the service today. We began with a song of praise as we marched around the block. At the door of the church we stopped, and the whole mood of the day changed. The praise gave way to somber foreboding, dark clouds are gathering around Golgotha, and our path takes us directly into the heart of the storm.

At the center of this conflict stands one we call the Prince of Peace. How is it that around his head this epic conflict unfolds? A sociologist named Jonathan Haidt wrote a book called, The Righteous Mind.¹ Though he is an atheist, he studies the functions of different human phenomena in the context of societies. He finds in this book that humans are 90% bee (a critter that works a lot like the ant,) and 10% chimpanzee. We get into groups, like ants or bees, and we define our group against other groups. Mostly it just provides us with a sense of identity—we belong here, not there. It's a false sense of self because it is constructed in contrast to another such construct, but we believe it

¹ Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind, Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Vintage Books, New York, NY. 2012.

nonetheless. Sometimes this definition leads to conflict between groups.

Then occasionally we get someone who takes advantage of the group mentality for their own purposes...and we have conflict. The conflict is not like the conflict between two groups, the conflict is between a group that wants to maintain a sense of unity and one who is willing to sacrifice that unity for his or her own short-term ends.

Conflict looks differently through the dualistic mind vs. the unitive mind. To the dualistic mind conflict arises between conflicting desires, needs or goals. Like two armies of ants, war breaks out when different desires, needs and goals clash between two individual or group egos. Both think they are right—of course, and neither can afford to see the validity of the other's point of view. The difference between them is probably only one of degree. One might be bigger or stronger than the other, one might be able to out-negotiate the other, but both groups are still ants...

Behind this way of understanding conflict is a dualistic world. God and the Devil duke it out on the field of the world. God and the devil are essentially the same, except that one represents the good and the other represents evil. You have, essentially, two gods.

The conflict of the epic story of this week is not the conflict between equals, even if one is good and the other is evil. It is the conflict between The One and those who would destroy the unity of the one. It is the struggle to maintain the whole against small-minded forces that would destroy it for ego-driven reasons. This is the way the unitive mind sees conflict.

We have been talking all Lent about how from God's perspective our little divisions are just lines on the same piece of paper. They help us choose toothpaste at Albertsons, but if we are going to truly love as we are loved we must transcend the dualistic mind and learn to see as God sees. We are all, and all of creation, sacramental in the sense that we make present the divine heart in some way or other. We may be blind to it in one person or another, or it may honestly be tarnished, hidden or marred, but it is there, nonetheless. We can come to see how everything fits when we yield the rule of our egos to the direction of the Spirit communing with our spirits at the heart of our own being. It is we who deny the unity and try to make it serve our own purposes. We are the miscreant monkey who turns on the whole and tries to destroy it. We have forgotten about the big piece of paper, all we see is the lines that divide us, lines we ourselves have drawn, and yet we imagine them to be as important as the paper itself.

This is the nature of the conflict between good and evil. This is the epic conflict of this week, the nature of the conflict of our beings.

Let's see how it plays out in today's Gospel lesson:

Jesus and the disciples:

- Jesus celebrates the great Meal of our Unity and the disciples begin grumbling about who is greatest.
- Jesus prays for their strength and Peter makes unfounded claims of loyalty, over against their enemies.
- Jesus tells them to be prepared to fight and they find two swords. Jesus says, "It is enough." What will two swords be against the mob coming to get him? Militarily this is a stupid call, but if this is what they need to keep up their nerve and not succumb to dualistic thinking then it will be enough. Another kind of fight will be required.

Jesus and the Jews:

- They come with arms to catch a robber, and Jesus is the prince of peace who willingly goes with them.
- Peter deploys one of the swords against the servant of the high priest and Jesus heals him.
- Jesus is taken into trial and the Jews try to get him to say something for which they can condemn him, but he doesn't give them the option.

Jesus and Pilate:

- To Pilate's questioning Jesus does not give a straight answer. Any answer he could give in words could be forced into the service of a dualistic fight, and Jesus isn't going to do that.
- When Pilate seeks to release him (a unitive thing to do) the Jews go into an uproar. They are not going to get what they want, and like a miscreant monkey they are willing to riot to get it.
- All the while Jesus stands there in purple robe and drying blood, both symbols of his mocking.
- Then he carries—until he cannot anymore—the instrument of his own execution, and allows himself to be nailed to it and killed.

At every point Jesus' resistance is only to the dualistic mind trying to be the ultimate and only mind. His actions show how in the end the eternal plan of God is being worked out. The one piece of paper on which we insist on scribing our divisive lines is what Jesus sees, and he dies on the Cross for the divisions and life-killing actions of humanity. In spite of our sinfulness Jesus reconciles us through exactly our own misdeeds!

The conflict here is not really between two sides, it is between the aberration and the truth, the tail picking a fight with the dog. Resurrection seems inevitable!

So how then shall we live? Do not lose your nerve in the face of evil. Evil is always the smaller thing, destined to its own self-destruction. The fight against evil is not as two opposing armies crossing swords. It is the struggle to keep the one piece of paper in view while all the world clamors for division. Like Jesus, keep your eye on the paper, not the lines. Know that in the end even the evil we do will serve the great purposes of God. Resurrection will take all the evil of the world and absorb it, transform it, and make it part of the great tapestry of existence which weaves the very face of God.