

28 July 2019

Reading: Colossians 2:6-15 Text: Colossians 2:15 "He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the Cross and marched them naked through the streets."

SPIRITUAL TYRANTS

Introduction: Paul tells us that "You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him." What a wonderful way for Paul to remind us of the reality of Christ in the universe. In fact, the whole letter to the Colossians is a testament to the power of love and Jesus in our lives. But Paul was annoyed that parts of the congregation were being misled. "Watch out for people who try to dazzle you with big words and intellectual double talk. They want to drag you off into endless arguments that never amount to anything." Except, of course, they do result in divisiveness and confusion: They speak with sham authority, not any real authority and although exposed they are still with us and must be "marched naked through the streets" by every generation. Let us spend a few minutes looking at these spiritual tyrants that occupy Paul's attention, as well as our own.

Certainly, tyrant number one of the early church was the **Law of the Old Testament**. The Law was used to limit the rise of gentiles in the early church and attempted to shape the church in such a way that it would confuse the worship of Jesus with the obeying of ancient laws. Paul addressed this tyrant saying: "So don't put up with anyone pressuring you in details of diet, worship services, or holy days. . . . Don't tolerate people who try to run your life, ordering you to bow and scrape, insisting that you join their obsession with angels and that you seek out visions. They're a lot of hot air, that's all they are." Unfortunately, the hot air has kept on rising producing a rain of biblical literalists through the centuries. They are with us still: Preaching on who is sinful and who may be excluded from God's Kingdom of Love. This tyrant pits Christian against Christian and holds the Church up to ridicule. No wonder the fastest growing religious group in the U.S. is "no religion!"

Another spiritual tyrant is what Paul calls the **Empty Traditions of human beings. . . creating a pretentious and infantile religion**. Paul was certainly not making many friends in the traditional Jewish community with these words! I doubt if he would make many friends today. Note that he did say "empty traditions." For those of us who hold many traditions dear, that is an important distinction. I love the traditions of the Episcopal/Anglican Church. The bells and smells of high church with processions accompanied by massive pipe organ and choir work wonders on my faith. But if they become mere spectacles, emptied of spiritual meaning, then they fall into the "pretentious and infantile religion" category of which Paul spoke. The Episcopal church has, ever since its creation after the Revolutionary War, been considered by some to be more concerned with social prestige than with spiritual growth. Up through much of World War II, being a military officer in the U.S. by and large meant being Episcopal. From the White House to Wall Street the Episcopal Church held sway. Genteel exclusion was much more important than inclusive growth. We had pretention down pat!

Today we have many large churches that would meet Paul's criterion of being part of an "infantile religion." Infants respond to instant gratification. If hungry, they are fed; if wet, they are changed, if sleepy they nap. They quickly learn that crying produces results. Cry and you shall be given. There are a great many feel good churches today. Stripped of intellectual and spiritual content they

Page two

serve as a baby sitter for the soul. Frequently spending more time and energy on political tasks than on spiritual ones, they divide and confuse the Christian community. Turning political issues into spiritual absolutes, infantile religions make the application of reason impossible and debate fruitless. Such religions were the bane of the early church and blaspheme contemporary Christianity.

The final tyrant is one that not only was noted by Paul, but fought by all of the writers of the New Testament: **The Merchants of Hate**. Hate sells. It seems to leap right off the shelves of the supermarket of values. It is the candy of values. It may rot our teeth and set the stage for diabetes, but we find it awfully hard to resist. It sometimes seems that love is the Brussel sprouts of values. We all know that it is good for you, and, covered in cheese, it is even consumable, but it demands more self-control and discipline than we want to spend. But why does hate, in all its many forms, seem to find such a large buying public? Let us note that all of us have supermarket carts that contain both hate and love. None of us are perfectly one or the other. The mixture varies over time and over issues. Here are four reasons why hate sells.

First of all, there are times when even the strongest among us are feeling weak and timid. There are problems that seem too big, too complex, too full of emotions for us to deal with. At our best we approach those times with the strengthening power of God's love. But, at our worse, we take the easy way, the unthinking way out, by buying into hate. Hating can give us a false, but comforting, sense of being strong.

Secondly, when our self-esteem is at low ebb, when our feelings of worthlessness and lack of accomplishment overwhelms us, hate gives us a sense of superiority. One may act as if they were saying, "I might not have achieved everything I wanted to in life, but at least I'm not black, Muslim", fill in the blank with the scape goat of the moment. Hate gives you superiority – it is a substitute for feeling good about yourself.

We all need to have a purpose and goals that are larger than we are individually. Love gives us that, but so does hate. While it may be difficult to express love for a greater good, it is easy to express hate for a given set of people or a specific set of ideas.

Finally, hate gives people a sense of identity. Who ever heard of a love group being reported on? But we all know of hate groups that make the news on a daily basis. The group membership and identity that hate gives many people is difficult to resist.

Conclusion: The spiritual tyrants were stripped of their mystery on the Cross. That they still live is our challenge as Christians. Paul gave us the best advice: "My counsel for you is simple and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you've been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now *live* him. You're deeply rooted in him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out quit studying the subject and start *living* it!" We are all able to defeat the spiritual tyrants by seeing their nakedness and by living Jesus Christ. Amen.