
Spiritual Warfare in this Pentecost Season

An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith

You might have thought what former President Obama said last week was most admirable. Not only did he affirm democracy and our national freedoms of conscience and religion. He also invoked God and even echoed one of our baptismal vows: “to respect the dignity of every human being” (Book of Common Prayer 305). Speaking at a state event in Germany he said:

“In the eyes of God, a child on the other side of the border is no less worthy of love and compassion than my own child. We can’t distinguish between them in terms of their worth and their inherent dignity, and that they’re deserving of shelter and love and education and opportunity.”

Now here’s our civic problem. No matter how admirable and praiseworthy such declarations sound, in the context of our political climate they cannot be appreciated simply on their own terms. To think so naively ignores the fact that we live in a season—perhaps like most political seasons—when public debate is so conflicted, so polarized and adversarial that even the most admirable and praiseworthy declarations too often read as political rhetoric and partisan self-interest.

But here’s the gospel good news! Christian freedom empowers us to belong to a different order of politics and debate. Indeed, divine empowerment was the focus of our new Pentecost season inaugurated just a few Sundays ago. So our Pentecostal identity in this political season empowers us to engage in spiritual warfare that does not vilify fellow citizens at home or opponents abroad.

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).

The hallmark of *spiritual* warfare is opposition not against other people but against the ideologies that hold us differently captive. Confessing our share of complicities, we refuse to let ourselves be possessed by the Luciferian spirit who delights in civil strife, discord, and mutual condemnation. Scripture calls that spirit “a murderer from the beginning,” declares that “there is no truth in him . . . for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44), and discerns him as “the accuser of our comrades . . . who accuses them day and night before our God” (Revelation 12:10). In defiance we renounce his relentless campaigns of accusation and blame, gossip and fault-finding, scapegoating, shaming, and scandal-mongering.

More affirmatively we reframe our relationships with one another in the terms that Jesus himself evoked in the gospel reading this past Sunday. There he himself was grossly misunderstood for his spiritual warfare (and elsewhere warned that his followers would be similarly maligned). Nonetheless, knowing people as did, he also affirmed:

“‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”
(Mark 3:33-35)

Taking into account our differences we must still do the will of God as we understand God—certainly! But precisely in that context let us also reach out to other people as kindred citizens—sisters and brothers across our differences, alter egos on

multiple issues of difference. An awesome challenge, isn't it? That's why, in the providence of God, we have this long Pentecost season every year—again this year before the fall elections—to practice, practice, practice. And may the Holy Spirit empower us to practice with far more grace this Pentecost season than ever before in years past!

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