

Battle Lines

Matt 24:3-8

“3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’ 4Jesus answered them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. 5For many will come in my name, saying, “I am the Messiah!” and they will lead many astray. 6And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but

the end is not yet. 7For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines* and earthquakes in various places: 8all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

Today we have as our theme The Butter Battle Book. Published in 1984 it was probably the most controversial book Dr. Seuss wrote. It speaks of the small, and sometimes insignificant issues, that cause rifts between peoples and nations. It starts with one generation teaching the other why to mistrust people who are different than them but as the

book progresses so does the level of destruction that can be leveled against the perceived enemy. The book ends with the question of who will be the first to drop the bomb that would destroy life as they know it. Both sides have the weapon and neither appears to be backing down.

This book was written during the years of the cold war. It was at a time when nuclear weapons existing at levels to make sure that if one side blinked the other side would make sure no one, or at least a limited number, survived. It wasn't until the late 80's when the

Berlin Wall came down that many of us felt that both sides had finally backed away and that some form of sanity had once again found a home. That was then, but this is now.

For many of us the true enemies we need to fear were those that lived in other countries, places where people had a different language, a different religion, a different world view.

This has been our reality when our front pages talk about North Korea and the escalating dialogue that seems to make a nuclear holocaust again a real possibility. But most of us know that if we go down this road all of us

will lose. None of us will come out a winner.

Wars fought on foreign soil have defined our nation with men and women who have stood, and are standing in harms way, really being the only ones who understand the total cost of sacrifice they might be called to make.

Certainly, the families of those who are at risk and who have suffered great loss have a better glimpse into the costs that are possible.

Those of us sheltered from the effects have an arms-length view, often distorted by what we are willing to see and accept. And the church, often in its over exuberant need to reject

conflict of any kind, demonize those who have given there all for a greater cause many do not understand. To those who have served and to those that are serving we all owe a debt of gratitude for your service and your sacrifice.

This has been a hard message to write. Because for this generation, as glaring as the possible destruction if the worst comes to pass with North Korea, the real battle lines that are doing the most damage are much, much closer to home.

Back in 1943 the United States war department realized this when they put out a

17 minute film dealing with the war at home. I want to play a brief portion of that for you this morning. (Play film).

When watching this film did you have the same guttural response as I did. Absent the flaming torches from the garden center at Walmart, didn't this sound and look a lot like Charlottesville, Virginia just a few short days ago? When the "far right" claims its ground as the group who has been most devalued and put upon, goes into the street to claim its rightful place. When white men carry flames and identify themselves as the rightful heirs to the

American dream seeking to snuff out the dreams of those who have suffered under oppression for generations and who are just now beginning to grasp the first rungs of what many of us have taken for granted; battle lines are forming, and losing, not winning, becomes the eventual option.

In this crowd of angry white men were people identifying as skinheads, kkk, neo-nazis, and white power advocates. They came to protect what was theirs. And the symbol of this is a statue of General Robert E Lee, a man forever identified with not only the

Confederate States but also, and maybe unrightly so, anyone hoping to preserve the history of slavery and oppression that existed in the first two hundred years in our nation's less than stellar history.

Battle lines are being drawn and another public testing of those lines played out before our eyes in Charlottesville and from the White House itself.

But battle lines have been drawn for generations. And even within the walls of God's church, battle lines have been established and walls have been built and

doors locked to protect the integrity and purity found in belief systems using distorted interpretations of scripture to justify these actions. We know these lines and many have lived through them. Lines separating men and women, lines culling out divorced people, deep lines around the issue of abortion, and now lines rejecting people from fellowship around issues of sexuality. And because these lines have fragmented the church it has been hard to be a unified front around issues like what we saw in Virginia just a week ago and in a

disturbing ad-hoc press conference on
Tuesday.

But maybe we have seen enough. Maybe the resurfacing of these images of hatred and bigotry have served to awaken a sleeping giant founded in a common belief in Jesus Christ. Maybe we are finally ready to put aside those details that separate and claim the common ground that unites.

How do we do this? John Palovitz is a pastor of the North Raleigh Community Church and his thoughts on this subject went viral this past week. Barb made me aware of his

comments and I lift up a portion of them for your consideration.

“What we’ve watched unfolding in Charlottesville, with hundreds of white people bearing torches and chanting about the value of white lives and shouting slurs, is not a “far Right” protest. When you move that far right, past humanity, past decency, past goodness—you’re something else.

You’re not a supremacist, you’re not a nationalist, and you’re not alt-Right.

This is racism. This is domestic terrorism. This is religious extremism. This is bigotry.

It is blind hatred of the most vile kind. It doesn't represent America. It doesn't represent Jesus.

It doesn't speak for the majority of white Americans. It's a cancerous, terrible, putrid sickness that represents the absolute worst of who we are.

No, naming it won't change it, but naming it is necessary nonetheless. It's necessary for us to say it—especially when the media won't, when our elected leaders won't, when our President won't. It's necessary to condemn it so that we do not become complicit in it.

This is our national History being forged in real-time, and to use words lacking clarity now would be to risk allowing the ugliness off the hook or to create ambiguity that excuses it. And yes, there are all sorts of other ways that racism and privilege live and thrive; ways that are far less obvious or brazen than tiki-torch wielding marches. There are systemic illnesses and structural defects and national blind spots that we need to speak to and keep pushing back against, and we will. But in moments that are this clear, when the

malignancy is so fully on display—we'd better have the guts to say it.

White people especially need to name racism in this hour, because somewhere in that crowd of sweaty, dead-eyed, raw throated white men—are our brothers and cousins and husbands and fathers and children; those we go to church with and see at Little League and in our neighborhoods. They need to be made accountable by those they deem their “own kind.” They need to know that this is not who we are, that we don't bless or support or respect this. They need white faces speaking

directly into their white faces, loudly on behalf of love.

Though all of us can eventually trace our lineage back to oneness, all carrying a varied blood in our veins—the surface level differences matter to these torch-bearers.

They value white lives and white voices above anything else, and so we whose pigmentation matches theirs need to speak with unflinching clarity about this or we simply amen it.

So I'm saying it.

We are not with you, torch-bearers, in Charlottesville or anywhere.

We do not consent to this.

In fact we stand against you, alongside the very beautiful diversity that you fear.

We stand with people of every color and of all faiths, people of every orientation, nationality, and native tongue.

We are not going to have this. This is not the country we've built together and it will not become what you intend it to become."

I know today may feel a little heavy for our light and fluffy August series, but these wonderful children's books remind us that we need to be intentional about what we say and

teach our children. We need to be intentional to talk about love, inclusion, acceptance, and hope. The darkness in our world often attempted to blot out the Christ light we carry, and so we need to be strong in this effort and this cause.

Last week I closed with some lyrics by a great songwriter of the 60's and 70's. True to form I will do the same again today. The song, "For What It's Worth" by Steven Stills.

There's something happening here

What it is ain't exactly clear

There's a man with a gun over there

Telling me I got to beware

I think it's time we stop, children, what's that
sound?

Everybody look what's going down

There's battle lines being drawn

Nobody's right if everybody's wrong

Young people speaking their minds

Getting so much resistance from behind

It's time we stop, hey, what's that sound

Everybody look what's going down

What a field-day for the heat

A thousand people in the street

Singing songs and carrying signs

Mostly say, hooray for our side

It's s time we stop, hey, what's that sound

Everybody look what's going down

Paranoia strikes deep

Into your life it will creep

It starts when you're always afraid

You step out of line, the man come and take
you away

We better stop, hey, what's that sound

Everybody look what's going down

Stop, hey, what's that sound

Everybody look what's going down

Stop, now, what's that sound

Everybody look what's going down

Stop, children, what's that sound

Everybody look what's going down

The world is busy building battle lines. From Charlottesville to our own backdoor. Do we have the courage to stand together and to stand strong trying to build each other up rather than tearing each other down? Are we willing to live out the convictions of our faith where all people are to be honored and treasured as children of God? The time may be coming when we will need to make a choice. I pray we will make the right one!