

Sermon for Sunday, July 5, 2009

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

By JoAnn Taylor

First Lesson	2 Samuel 5:1-5,9-10
Psalm	48
Second Lesson	2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Gospel	Mark 6:1-13

...In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

C.S. Lewis wrote many books in his lifetime, but one in particular seems to fit today's readings. The book is *The Screwtape Letters*. It's a fictitious diary of scolding letters from a mature demon (Screwtape) to his young nephew (Wormwood). It is Wormwood's job to keep a recent convert to Christianity from being productive for Christ (the Enemy). Screwtape's letters point out where Wormwood has failed or missed an opportunity. It's an interesting read and reveals much about the human condition. Let's listen in as they discuss the apostle Paul.....

My dear Wormwood,

The following instructions shall help you proceed in further handicapping your target's effectiveness in the Enemy's kingdom. Remember that your greatest ally is his belief that you are a pain – an inconvenience – a thorn to prick his conscience. He thinks you have been sent to keep him from becoming boastful and conceited about the visions that he has seen in the Enemy's kingdom. When he is feeling weak or alone, press home the thought that the Enemy has planted you there because of a lack of trust – that you are a spy waiting for him to fail so that you can report it – that you are a sign of the Enemy's lack of faith in him.

Continue to press home the idea that the Enemy doesn't care about his welfare – the Enemy is only concerned with himself. The fact that your target has asked three times to have you removed and the Enemy has failed to answer that request should indicate the Enemy's lack of concern. Play with his memory of the visions – let him think that those visions were figments of his imagination – that they don't exist. Or better yet, he has been granted visions of the Enemy's kingdom, so let his conceit build until he can stand it no longer and boasts of what he has seen.....let him boast of his greatness. Let his ego grow until it overwhelms his new found humility.

Whatever you do don't let him continue on this "weakness is good because then (I can't say the words) [the Enemy's] power can rest on him". You must at all cost end this way of thinking. DO NOT Fail me on this!

Your affectionate Uncle,
Screwtape.

As we heard in 2nd Corinthians today, Paul is talking about an experience that happened 14 years ago – a vision of God's kingdom and the things that he heard – things that cannot be repeated to those of us on earth. Paul, just a few moments before was boasting of his sufferings for the LORD – his weakness, the pain he has suffered, the hunger, thirst and more. The culmination comes in today's passages when Paul says that he "pleaded with the Lord to remove the thorn in his flesh (Satan's messenger)" and the Lord answered him saying, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my

power is made perfect in your weakness.” Paul concludes by boasting of his weakness and tells us he delights in the many difficulties and hardships which he has suffered. He claims that when he is weak, then he is strong through Christ.

How can one be strong when weak? I know that if I’m feeling ill, or weak I sure don’t feel strong. Physical strength is not what Paul’s talking about though. He’s talking about spiritual strength. He’s talking about the knowledge that comes through faith that God will always be there. God has proven over and over that his grace and favor are eternal....never ending, without price. The price has already been paid by Jesus when he died for our sins – for our salvation – on the cross. Many people have found that God is able to help them in their good works; can provide courage and strength in the face of adversity; can quiet fears, give wisdom and provide love when we need it – not just when we remember to ask for it.

The poem Footprints in the Sand illustrates this. The author is dreaming about walking on the beach – the highway of his life – with God. He can clearly see that there are two sets of footprints in the Sand.....but is disturbed when he sees only one set of footprints during the periods of his life when he suffered great loss, pain or fear. He asks God why there is only one set of footprints during those times....and God’s answer is “It is during those times, my child, that I carried you.”

Jesus, too, is facing adversity. He has come home to Nazareth and is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. The gospel doesn’t say what Jesus was teaching – what passage or prophecy he was expounding on – but the gospel is clear that the people were amazed by what they heard. They questioned what they were hearing – asked where Jesus came by such wisdom; they questioned how he could perform the miracles they had heard of. Remember, these are people that Jesus grew up with – they knew him as a boy – the son of the carpenter, Joseph – not as the son of God. They know his mother, his brothers, and sisters.....and they cannot bring themselves to believe what he is telling them. So great was their lack of faith in him that he could perform no miracles, except to lay hands on a few of the sick and heal them.

Wormwood and Screwtape must have been extremely happy with this development – the son of their greatest Enemy – and he is rejected by his own people - their lack of faith and their violent reaction to Jesus was amazing [I think] even to the demons. But their excitement over Jesus’ rejection would have been short-lived because just after this incident, Jesus sends out his disciples in pairs to minister among the people and gives them authority over evil spirits. He sends them out like sheep among wolves, a strong testament of his faith in their abilities even if they themselves did not yet totally believe.

If God wrote you a letter about faith and trust, what would it sound like? [pause] Maybe it would sound like the following letter from God to the apostle Paul:

My beloved Paul,

I have something important for you to understand. Our relationship is based on faith. Your faith may wax and wane, but my faith is eternal and will endure forever. I will never let you go. Continue to put your trust in me...remember these words: “Don’t be afraid, just believe.”

That is your responsibility in our relationship – to believe; to believe that my love for you is unfailing....to believe and trust in my goodness. When you are discouraged, quickly turn to Me; call out for my help and I will deliver you from your distress. I am your shield, your fortress in times of trouble. I will fill you with peace and joy so that you may overflow with the power of hope through My Spirit.

Don’t be afraid. Be strong, courageous, and believe for I am with you. I will never fail you or forsake you. I am the Lord; when you hope in ME you will not be disappointed.

Don’t be afraid; just believe.

God

And finally, what about our demons, Screwtape and Wormwood? Let us listen in on a final Letter from Screwtape to Wormwood:

My dear, incompetent Nephew,

You have FAILED!!! You let your subject get away. He is now firmly entrenched in the Enemy's camp. Did I not carefully explain how you were to proceed with this subject? Did I not warn you to beware of his penchant for believing weakness to be his strength? DID I NOT ORDER YOU TO PREVENT HIM FROM BECOMING AN ADVOCATE FOR THE ENEMY AT ALL COST???

You, my dear, bumbling nephew will pay dearly for your incompetent handling of this subject. Our Lord and Master is greatly displeased because this subject was one of the Enemy's own disciples. Not only that, but we had this subject firmly within our grasp at one time – he was our greatest ally. He personally sentenced thousands of the Enemy's converts to death – persecuted them without mercy. AND YOU LET HIM GET AWAY!!

Do not come to me for assistance when you are called to account – I will have enough trouble saving my own skin. I told our Master that you could handle this job...and you assured me that you could. But you LIED!! You lied to me and now.....catastrophe!

Your disappointed and ravenous Uncle,
Screwtape

Remember, when faced with adversity – Don't be afraid; just believe.....believe in the power of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the salvation won for us by his death. If we believe....if we offer ourselves to Christ, then nothing can separate us from the love of God.....not even Wormwood and his uncle, Screwtape.

Amen.