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Religion and Politics:

The Real Enemy

John 10:1-10

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The other day I was talking with my wife over coffee and she said something to the effect of, “We’re only a month away from this campaign season being over. I can’t wait.” Then I thought I would be hilarious to remind her that, once the general election season is over, get ready for the midterms. Right? Yay!

Yeah, that face you’re making right now is the one she made, too.

And that feeling you’ve got just now as I reminded you that this is all probably going to happen again for the midterms; that feeling of being stuck and frustrated, it’s not just you, it’s widespread in our culture. It’s widespread because for the last 20 years in weaponized politics and certainly over the last twelve months, you have probably felt a lot of pressure, you’ve felt unable to understand people you’ve understood your whole life... like family who’ve watched you grow up, your babysitters, the friends who you grew up with. Speaking of friends, your friends list on Facebook and Instagram might be a lot shorter these days. But you also feel stuck because the people you thought were supposed to represent you, who you thought were going to be your voice on Capitol Hill, for your issues, well they were happy to get your vote and then, in effect, change their number and just do something else. You’re feeling stuck because as each one of these grueling campaign seasons comes and goes, you have one precious vote to give, but what really changes.

Stuck.

Audre Lourde, a black activist and poet, long ago in her work in the feminist movement found herself in a similar situation. A situation where it seemed the best her movement could hope for were small, mental, moral victories, but no real change. But really, her feeling of stuckness produced a moment of clarity for her that I think could be useful for us today. She said, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s

house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”

What she was trying to communicate was that we can’t expect that the tools that caused the problem we currently find ourselves stuck in, can be part of a long-term solution. The reason is because they are the master’s tools and our movement as Christians, as the church, does not belong to the master.

That begs at least a couple of questions: To which movement, or should I say “campaign” do we belong and what are the tools? The answers to these questions are essential; essential for our own sake, but also for the sake of the world for which we, all of us, the church was created. So, let’s begin.

The first one is this: Who is the Master?

When Christians seek to identify who we stand in opposition to, we have a character in mind, an enemy. This character has gone by many names: the master of the air, the accuser, the Satan, the devil—The Enemy. Christian spiritual writers have described this enemy in many ways, from a serpent in a garden, to an active agent out in the world, to the collective brokenness that is found deep inside all of us. Regardless of how you understand this character, it is important for you to know that a subplot that runs throughout the entire Bible is a battle between God and this enemy. A battle that begins in creation where this character causes Adam and Eve, our primordial selves, to question the nature of reality, the nature of reality as God had created it. It’s a small but subtle shift that sent humanity searching for a way to live and flourish apart from God. The rest of the Old Testament is simply a reference history of all the ways this enemy innovates and changes and builds on this tactic to keep us away from living life and life abundantly: violence, lying, cheating, power, shame, war, xenophobia are all the tools this enemy uses. And he uses them because they are not ineffective or lack obvious utility, they get things done, and we know it, and that’s why we have such a hard time putting them down.

When the curtain comes up on the New Testament the enemy has yard signs in just about every lawn. Not really, there are no lawns, but much of the world is designing life and relationship with those tools. And then, in the middle of flyover country as far as the Holy Land is concerned, a new candidate arrives on

the scene. A candidate with a bold platform that isn't new, but is certainly out of style and nearly forgotten. This candidate, Jesus of Nazareth, says this, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Stick that on a button.

So Jesus starts moving around the area sharing this message of good news, this gospel, this freedom. And guess who decides to follow him first? People like us. People who are stuck. People from all kinds of unique backgrounds. The people without a voice, without a seat at the table, people with unrealized hope. People for whom that enemy's tools don't work.

The enemy notices the crowds because it isn't long until he weasels his way onto Jesus' schedule to try and shut down the movement. He offers Jesus material security, immortality, and power. He offers Jesus the best the enemy's tools can get you. But Jesus, knowing it isn't the best there is, sends him packing and moves on to continue to show people there is a new world to be part of, that the enemy's tools can't build...a new Kingdom, if you will.

Not willing to be outdone, and not giving up so easily, and not unlike candidates do in the news media today, the enemy sends out surrogates to slow down Jesus' progress. The Herodians, the Pharisees, and the Romans. The three groups that had gained the most out of using these tools in the first century world, and had the three groups that had the most to lose if they couldn't continue to use them, all do their best to slow Jesus.

The Herods use the tool of "win at all costs pragmatism." It is a tool that says that how you get the win doesn't matter. If you remember the Christmas story, then you remember just how committed they were to that. They tried to end the movement literally in the cradle. When that didn't work they set about hassling and persecuting Jesus' followers, killing them in some situations. Then there were the Pharisees who used the tool of exclusivity. They turned the mission God had given Abraham, their father, to make a worldwide family, into an impossible curriculum only a select few people could pass. And then there was Rome. The unquestioned powerhouse, the odds-on favorite in the ancient world. Their tool of choice was brute force. It's most recognized instrument was the cross.

The enemy deploys these surrogates and a host more at Jesus because Jesus is a threat to the house, a threat to the kingdom the enemy had built. Jesus wasn't a threat because he was more skilled with the same tools. No, the reason he was a threat was because he had new tools the enemy couldn't deal with. Tools for a new kind of kingdom. Tools you and I can use today as we press against this feeling of stuckness during this campaign season.

Tools we find right here in this small little passage about sheep, sheep-pens, and shepherds in the Gospel of John.

The first tool is this: Bigger pens. The Pharisees depended on their ability to design the sheep pen and to determine who could enter. They used religious rules to do this and it made for a small group of people that got to be invited to the party, leaving many people left out. Jesus turns this system on its head by declaring that he is the door to the sheep pen and he is also the shepherd. And from his stump speech we heard earlier when he quoted Isaiah, we know that when Jesus senses someone making the sheep pen smaller or exclusive, harder to get into, that he is going to open the gate wide and make more room. Friends, we are under constant threats not of religious legalism, but political legalism that is only capable of making smaller sheep pens, smaller social circles. Our response as Jesus followers must be like Jesus: when the world wants to draw smaller circles that exclude other people, we must draw a circle around them, and make it bigger. When we are asked to draw a social circle that excludes someone based on their political affiliation or any other criteria, we must push back and draw a bigger one. This is a worldwide family for all people.

Number two is that we need to be shepherds for the sheep. Now Jesus says that's what he is. He does not say that the sheep are for the shepherd, but that the shepherd is for the sheep. The other way around would be the way the Herodians thought that it worked: that people were there for their gain. That is how it works in the master's kingdom. But in Jesus' kingdom, the shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Each of us individually and all of us together today in the world are the body of Christ. We are the shepherd in the world today. We exist for the sake of the world, not the other way around. So when the world wants us to ask "What is it that I gain?" we have to reply no "What is it that I can give?" "What is it about this one beautiful life God has to given me and us together that

my neighbor requires now?" Even if that neighbor has a sign with a name on it that is different than the one in your yard.

And the third tool is this: in response to the Romans, then and today, we must be resurrection people. The Romans ultimate threat to the world was power. That is why they made crucifixion a public display, that's why these crosses were on hills. So that the world would know that if you messed with Rome, you would end up just like this. For all of history, we have taken the bait on this tool and we have tried to figure out how to overcome power with still more power. And the result of this most of the time is just escalation. Jesus offers you and me a different way. He reminds us that he is the good shepherd, and that the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. His life isn't taken. It is freely given. And because of his relationship with God, a relationship we all enjoy on this side of Easter, he can take it up again. We will take it up again.

To quote Paul in his letter to the Corinthians who were struggling in a similar situation, "Death, where is your sting? Death, where is your victory?"

Friends, I know you feel stuck. So do I. I'm tired of losing friends, not being heard, I'm tired of not seeing progress. You know I've heard that sometimes pastors only preach sermons that they really need to hear. And this one is true in my case. Because I need to repent. I need to go a different way. My encouragement to you today and to myself is to lay down the tools we all have been using because they weren't made for the future we are building. Instead, look to Jesus, the good shepherd. Instead of excluding people, draw wider circles. Instead of being preoccupied with winning, fall in love with people. And then when the power of the enemy seems too great to overcome, remember that we are a people of resurrection and it is building a world that power can't take.