

## **The Children of the Wrath**

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**Ephesians 2:1-10**

March 14, 2021 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

Have you ever wondered if Christian faith can still make a positive difference in our world? Given the high level of anger and division, the violence, vengeance, and forces like nationalism and various competing ideologies: can the message of the gospel really change things for the better?

Lately, more and more, I have wondered.

When pitted against the powers of culture and identity politics, nationalism and political ambitions, the forces of mendacity and the half-truths that are the feeding ground of conspiracy theories, vicious polemics and propaganda, let alone the deadly sins of greed, envy, selfishness, lust and pride, the virtues of Christian faith seem outgunned.

How can self-less-ness overcome such forces? How can a love that sacrifices itself triumph over brutality? Peace, pax, shalom, salaam, stand metaphorically, if not literally, on the wrong end of automatic weapons and deadly projectiles.

Even some Christian preachers, embarrassed by the simple gospel, redefine words like “meekness” so that when they preach the Sermon on the Mount their listeners aren’t offended or challenged too much by what Jesus actually said.

Cynics, of course, have said all of this for years. The other day I heard a political commentator deriding what has come to be called “Kumbaya Moments.” But it doesn’t take a cynic to ask if forgiveness, fellowship, goodwill can really have much effect in the face of systemic and sustained violence and threats of violence, not to mention all the other shenanigans of force the world accepts as strong.

What possible difference — what possible good is accomplished — when a man who has had his coat stolen by another fellow on a cold street chases down the thief to give him his woolen muffler and leather gloves and warm hat too?

What possible difference — what possible good is really accomplished — when a woman refuses to allow disagreements over political perspective to end a friendship with her next door neighbor?

To stand for justice for some today is taken immediately as a slight of others.

To ask that we even question the rightness of an old assumption provokes anger.

In an age when personal identity seems to be all the rage, we seem to have lost what it means to identify as merely human.

To follow the way of a man who long long ago died alone at the hands of a violent empire, abandoned by others in his faith and even by most of his closest friends seems impotent to many people, even people who adorn themselves with the the cross, the symbol of that man's death.

Love. Mercy. Grace. Forgiveness. Kindness. Compassion: It all feels like too little. And we know it's always too late.

Does the way of Jesus still offer us a way out of the cycles of hatred and violence? Have you ever wondered?

Arthur C. Brooks, the former president of the American Enterprise Institute and a conservative political writer, wrote a book in 2019 titled, "Love Your Enemies." It speaks of a "culture of contempt" which has swept across not only the United States, but much of the world. Brooks described an "outrage industrial complex" operating at virtually every level of society, an industry running full-out 24/7 in both political parties, in political activism, in academia, in journalism, and in the religious world as well.

There are those who are only too ready to be outraged in reaction to whatever runs counter to their opinions, and who use their outrage (often broadcast over social media) as a weapon against those with whom they disagree. Every statement by potential opponents seems to be parsed to find fault; every fault is taken as a fatal flaw, a moral failing. Every political position demands an opposite and equally reactive position.

Even the most basic concepts of a free and democratic society like ours are up for grabs: "E pluribus unum" is seen by some as both a soft sentimental idea and a false and dangerous aspiration. "Win or lose," some demand; "all or nothing," others cry; "zero sum games proliferate." Fears multiply.

In this context, Brooks asks the compelling question, "Are you sick of fighting yet?"

And Brooks tells a remarkable story, which to me reads like a parable illustrating St. Paul's gripping words in Ephesians.

This is a true story. In September of 2017 two opposing groups faced one another in Washington D. C.. The terrible events that occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia, were still echoing loudly around the country when on that September day a Pro-Trump rally and a "Black Lives Matter" protest faced off. Hawk Newsome, a leader in the "Black Lives Matter" movement told how the day unfolded for him, at first predictably. Members of the opposing groups traded insults. Their assumptions, their opinions, were fixed long before they met one another. Hawk, himself, confesses that he went into that day assuming that the Pro-Trump folks would echo the racism he had witnessed in Charlottesville.

At first, shouts were heard from each side: "USA! USA! You don't like it, go away!" And opposing chants like: "Ignore them! They don't exist!" People were poised to escalate name calling into fist fighting, when something unexpected happened.

Tommy Hodges, the organizer of the Pro-Trump rally, saw Hawk in the crowd of "Black Lives Matter" protesters. He knew who Hawk was. And he invited Hawk up onto the podium to take a couple of minutes to share with the whole crowd his perspective. And Hawk accepted the invitation.

Now, right there, I'm sure there were partisans on both sides who felt their leaders were either crazy or maybe flirting with disaster, maybe getting a little soft, maybe in danger of compromising their cause. But Tommy invited Hawk to speak, and Hawk accepted.

Hawk began his brief comments by saying, "My name is Hawk Newsome. I am president of Black Lives Matter New York. I am an American. And the beauty of America is that when you see something broken in your country, you can mobilize to fix it."

At first there was stunned silence. Then as he laid out his brief message, there were a few boos. But Hawk kept at it. What happened next was miraculous. As Hawk explained that it was both his Christian faith and his love for America that led him to work for his cause, gradually the jeers turned to cheers. He closed by saying, "Listen, I want to leave you with this, and I'm gone. If we really want to make America great, we do it together."

As Hawk thanked Tommy for the chance to speak, and stepped from the podium, he was surrounded by a folks in that Pro-Trump crowd who embraced him.

Tommy demonstrated the vulnerability of giving Hawk a platform, literally handing him the microphone. Hawk demonstrated the vulnerability to speak truthfully to what anyone would have labeled a hostile audience. The crowd demonstrated the vulnerability of listening and being willing to treat one another as persons not positions.

Nothing good would have been achieved by just another shout-fest. But as Hawk reflected later, that day he met people with whom he is still in relationship, still in conversation. What violence could not achieve, vulnerability did.

And so I ask you again: Can the gospel of Jesus Christ possibly do any good in such a time as this? It's a genuine question. And we, of all people, need to be prepared to answer it.

Pablum responses to this question are less than worthless; they are perilous. There are real dangers here. I don't just mean physical dangers, although they are present too. I mean moral perils, like not being willing to face the possibility that we are wrong, or that reality is bigger and more complex than our own perspectives.

A young woman writing an editorial justifying "looting" might need to hear the terrible human costs of looting from the perspective of the owner of a small electronics store who planted his business in a now destroyed neighborhood to contribute to its well-being.

A man who argued that protesters against police brutality are all anti-police and dangerous to society might have to deal with the problem that not all police behaviors are deserving of his defense, and that in order for all lives to matter, Black lives must matter too.

Thoughtful Christianity has been largely AWOL in the midst of this crisis\*, while there are representatives of a less-thoughtful Christianity only too ready to be quoted on camera, complicit in the spirit of division, endorsing the hatred, and justifying the violence of the moment.

Indeed there are Christians aligned with a variety of political and ideological causes who would answer Arthur Brooks' question, "Are you sick of fighting yet?" with a resounding "NO!"

Right here, right now, in this wondrous country of ours, violent nationalist groups are claiming Christian symbols and holy texts to support their racist hatred. Right here, right now, radicals on the far left and the far right arm themselves with ideologies of exclusion. Right here, right now, peoples' reputations, personal and professional, and the accomplishments of a lifetime, are being trashed because they dare to ask questions that others want silenced.

Does the gospel of Jesus Christ stand a chance of making any positive difference in such a time?

Yes.

Yes.

Yes. But we must understand: We are not dealing merely with political partisanship, nor political ambitions; we are not dealing merely with an absence of civility, nor ultimately even with ideological affiliations; we are dealing with powers and principalities, with spiritual evil in high places, as St. Paul said. And, in such a situation, only the love and grace, the mercy and justice, the kindness and compassion, the truth and goodness and forgiveness of God will prove effective.

We must reclaim love not only as an affection among friends, but as the power of reconciliation to un-make enemies.

Yes. The gospel of Jesus Christ has something to say. And it can make a difference. And it does stand a chance in such a time. But here is where our response to the question demands more than perhaps even the church has wanted to risk. The gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to abandon the cycle of violence, recrimination and aggression that only leads to more violence, recrimination and aggression.

Blame begets blame.

Judgment begets judgment.

Wrath begets wrath.

The end of all of these ways is death. But the author of Ephesians tells us that we have been raised from the deadly cycle of vengeance to life in the resurrection power of the God who suffered death rather than return evil for evil. He has risen from the dead, and we with him; and now, with him, we are seated in the presence of the living God.

Once we also were called children of wrath, but now we are called children of God, and so we are. Our hope lies in not forgetting. All God's children are sinners, and we like Jesus are called to be "friends of sinners" too.

Amen.

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\* I have watched in dismay for forty years as many people in our denomination have poured scorn on thoughtful Christianity. But, today, I want us to reclaim that distinctive of the Reformed faith, "the life of the mind in the service of God." Today, we need thoughtful Christian faith if Christian faith is again to speak the gospel with any credibility in a cynical world that can see through Christian hypocrisy.