

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 27, 2015, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

"The Battle Rages On"

This is a message that needs to be brought to all of us, and it begins before today's Gospel takes place. One of my favorites Apostles, a hero of mine from Scripture, is the Apostle John. He usually shoots straight from the hip, you know how Peter is shooting all over the place sometimes, but I find John to be pretty wonderful. Just before this Gospel takes place in the Gospel of Mark, he and the other apostles are talking about who is greatest. Who should be number one, who should be sitting next to the Lord? Remember it was not too long ago we had a Gospel lesson in which John and James, the two sons of Zebedee, also known as the "sons of thunder" put momma to the task. They sent their mother to go to Jesus to ask if one could sit on the right hand and the other on the left hand side of the Lord. Well John is looking at this group of apostles, the twelve, and considering them to be just as in the old Dobie Gray song, "The In-Crowd", do you remember? They are the in-crowd, the inner circle, they are the ones who are standing by Jesus, they are the ones that He chose and empowered. Somebody else is doing ministry, and so John goes to Jesus and says to Him "*Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your Name, and we told him to stop because he was not one of us.*" Jesus says to him "*Do not stop him, no one who does a miracle in My Name can in the next moment say anything bad about Me. For whoever is not against us is for us.*" My brothers and sisters in Christ – there's a war goin' on!

In that war there are several battles. One of the battles is one that is about exclusivity, if you will, that we are God's chosen, the "frozen chosen" as it is sometimes called, and thinking that we are the only ones, the right ones to do ministry. Jesus says otherwise. He says that we need to look at who is doing ministry in His Name. Whoever is not against us is for us! This war, or this battle of the war, has another battle that is even bigger. It is raging, and that is the one with the enemy; the enemy that is after every baptized Christian! When you are baptized or when you give your life to Christ, two things happen. We all know that Jesus went to the cross for us, so a cross gets put upon your heart, and just as instantly as that cross goes on your heart – a target goes on your back! That target is for the enemy to go after you, or the enemy's workers, the enemy's henchmen, if you will. **There is a war going on!** And with any war – there are enemies and there are allies. **Jesus clearly tells us that anyone who is working in His Name is an ally.** We need to be aware of that. We are not supposed to be shooting "friendly fire!" We are not supposed to be saying "Oh that church over on Coffee, or that large church over on Gaskin." We are supposed to look at them and say – **we are in this battle together**, as a matter of fact, in James – the brother of Jesus says "*Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.*" "*There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you--who are you to judge your neighbor?*" (James 4:11-12) Isn't that incredible?

I would like you to open your pew Bibles. I will only ask you to open your Bibles twice. Turn please to page 1892, 1 Peter 5:8. Let's see what Peter has to say about this war that is going on.

Peter reminds us: *“be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith.”* We will talk in a few minutes about how we can resist him, with our faith; what protection we have against the enemy. But remember the cross on your heart and the target on your back? That’s what the enemy is going for; he wants to take you down! He will take and do all sorts of things to you. Maybe you will have to walk with a cane for a little while or for a great while, but you look to the Lord for strength. We know who wins, we know who the victor is, but we have to endure it. The enemy is out and prowling.

Now regarding other ministries the tendency is for us sometimes to point fingers at other denominations or to judge what they are doing. We know what James told us about judging.

One of the denominations that a lot of people look at with a critical eye, especially with this visit from the pope, (Pope Francis is here and is on every channel) is the Roman Catholic Church – which seems to have a large target on its back. A lot of people are pointing fingers. My family, my sisters and the rest of my family are Roman Catholic. I grew up a Roman Catholic until 1995 when Marilyn and I determined we were going to worship under one roof, and that was Redeemer in Jacksonville, Fl. Marilyn had been Presbyterian and I was Roman Catholic, even served as chairman of the Parish Council for about 12 years. I was a Lay Eucharistic minister and a Lector, doing the readings like Wesley did this morning. When my aunt, my father’s sister passed on and went to be with the Lord, and with my father and her brother Bill, back in January 2009, Marilyn and I, along with Theresa, (John did not go because had college and they were giving tests) flew down from Buffalo to Kennedy airport and on to New Jersey to attend her funeral. We went to the funeral home and I was asked by my cousins to dress appropriately in my collar. For the service, the Mass, the following day, they asked me to read the New Testament lesson. I was thrilled that I was able to take part because in the Roman Catholic Church I am not permitted to take part at the altar, the table – and I would appreciate no judgment regarding that. The Monsignor who celebrated the service came to me at the end of the Mass and gave me a green book, saying “Fr. John – I want you to look at that page right there and following, because you and I are going to do the graveside service, together.” He called me an ally, not an enemy! He called me because in the name of Christ, in the name of Jesus, we were able to stand together. My cousins saw that and they asked for that, praise be to God!

Now there are other situations that we see, for example, on August 10th, a great many Christians from Douglas and Coffee County gathered at the courthouse to stand on God’s Word. Wow! Were you there? If you were you know what I mean. If you were not, then you saw pictures on Facebook or the newspaper. What a great number of people – in spite of the heat! We got together as brothers and sisters in the Lord to pray together, to sing together, and to light candles – and to march together – following the cross, around the courthouse. What was really thrilling was that 1,500 people came out to share as brothers and sisters in the Lord, from all sorts of denominations, and not to say “oh, you got to that church over on East Ward” or “you got to that church over on XYZ Street.” It wasn’t about that.

We pulled together as brothers and sisters just letting Christ's light shine. That is what Jesus is saying today, to honor the faith of each one of those people that know Him and do work in His name. We will do something very similar to that on October 8th as we travel to Atlanta, and will gather at Liberty Plaza, across from the capitol building – **not as specific churches, but as the Body of Christ.** I want to invite all of you to come, who are physically able; I will have a sign-up sheet next Sunday so we can see who is going, and we can car pool!

We as Anglicans recognize “The Real Presence of Christ” in the Holy Eucharist - and many of the different denominations or churches share the Body and Blood of Christ, the bread and wine or the bread and grape juice in different ways and forms. We need to be reminded not to judge but instead to honor and to give respect to the fact that they are doing that in Christ's name and in remembrance as He directed them. Thanks be to God for this opportunity as this war rages on for us to stand with Him. But you know what? There are consequences. In any war there are consequences, and some of those consequences have to do with the little ones. People who are just finding Christ in their life - maybe just having given their life to Christ - **they are the Little Ones.** We have to be strong with them and teach them the right things – not some “off the cuff gospel” that is not the truth. We need to teach them the Word of God and nothing else; otherwise we should have a millstone around our neck. Jesus said so Himself. And if for some reason we fall and we sin – Jesus is not telling you to chop your finger off or to pluck your eye out or to cut your foot or leg off. He is saying STOP IT! If this hand sins – STOP IT – or there are consequences if you don't repent – stop it!

How many of you remember Jesus telling a wonderful parable about a man that was hated by the Jews, the Good Samaritan? This would have happened on the old Roman winding road that goes from Jericho winding all the way up to Jerusalem. And this man found another man almost naked and beaten on the side of the road – almost dead. A Levite and a priest walked their merry way because they did not want to become unclean – they wanted to avoid it. But this man, whose heart was touched, went over and helped this person, took him and put him upon his donkey, took him to an inn and paid in advance for his care and his food. He bandaged his wounds as well. This is the man that we call the Good Samaritan – how many of you remember that parable? It comes to life especially if you go there. It is kind of funny, this past July when Marilyn and I led a trip to Israel, some people on the bus came over and asked “where did the Good Samaritan happen? Fifteen years ago my response was “it didn't happen – it was just a parable!” But then I realized that Jesus used what people knew, and they knew that road and it is quite possible that there truly was a Good Samaritan that Jesus spoke about. He used what people knew, and they knew that road – the treacherous road with the terrible people that can come out at a moments' notice. Fifteen years ago we stopped our bus along that winding road. We stopped, got off – it was deserted. We went to look at St. George's Monastery which was across the chasm, and within a heartbeat we were surrounded by Bedouins who were trying to sell us all sorts of things. They came from nowhere! Jesus knew what this place was like – it was probably just the same 2,000 years ago! He used that as an illustration in

response to the question “*who is my neighbor?*” In today’s Gospel Jesus uses another thing that people know called Gehenna. The Gospel calls it Hell, but the people of Jerusalem called it Gehenna which is in the southeast corner of Jerusalem in the valley, and this place is a garbage dump. Right across from it was the “Dung Gate” and you know what was taken out through it. People would bring all their stuff and it burned – they burned the fires and they never went out. They brought all sorts of waste to that fire and so it was called Gehenna or hell. Jesus is telling us that if you sin and you die – you are not going to be taken to that garbage dump, but instead there is a real hell, a place where the fire NEVER goes out and there is a lot of suffering; a place of eternal damnation. That is the real Gehenna or hell – and we need to understand that in a war – there are allies, there are enemies, and so there are consequences. Now, I don’t know about you – but I don’t want my mail being delivered to Gehenna, no way, and I know my mailman doesn’t want to deliver my mail to Gehenna – I don’t want to go near that! So when I do something and I fall, I repent, I turn away and I ask for the Lord’s forgiveness and He made that possible by His journey to the cross. That’s what God is talking to us about; that is what Jesus is telling us – that there are two choices: smoking or non-smoking – for eternity. Think about it. We can follow His way – or we can follow Gehenna. And who is the way? Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. (John 14:6) There is no other way! He said so on the night before He died. I don’t care what other people tell you – the Bible tells me there is NO other way!

The second and last time that I am going to ask you to open your pew Bible, please turn to page 1821 – Ephesians 6:10-19. I promised you that I would tell you how, with this target on our back – how we can be protected. The answer is right here in what I am holding in my hand; **the answer IS what I am holding in my hand!** Thank you, Lord Jesus, that this church is now equipped with Pew Bibles, so that we cannot only hear the Word, but Be IN the Word – and be protected! Ephesians 6:10 *"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power." "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes." "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." "Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand." "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place," "and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace." "In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one." "Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, **which is the word of God.**" "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people." "Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel." Flaming arrows – where do the flames come from? Jesus told us – the real Gehenna. *"And take the helmet of salvation, and the Sword of the Spirit – the Word of God!"* We are equipped! God has given us the equipment.*

There's a war raging, there's a war goin' on! My brothers and sisters, we can also fight this war together as the Body of Christ every Monday night at 6:30 PM – right next door, to pray for this community and our freedoms. Also on October 8th as we head to Liberty Plaza in Atlanta. There is more information about this in your bulletins. Come and join with others from churches in Coffee County. They are allies! We come together on Sunday morning and Wednesday Nights – to be together as a community – to prayer together and to hear and study the Word of God.

My brothers and sisters, if we are carrying the Sword of the Spirit – the Lord told us – No weapon formed against us shall prosper. Do you believe this? Amen!