

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

'Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.'

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The ancient poet Homer once composed an extremely long poem. It is known as the Iliad. It tells the story of the King of Troy, who stole the beautiful wife of another King, Menelaus of Sparta. King Menelaus and all the Greeks went to war against the city of Troy, and for many years battled the Trojans and sieged its walls, and yet to no avail, for they had no great hero, no champion to give them the victory.

Or rather, it is not that they did not have such a hero; instead, the hero they had refused to fight, for he had been spurned in the dividing spoils of war. This hero, called Achilles, would not help end the war, but would have it prolonged, for he did not value his loyalty to the Greeks higher than his own personal sense of dignity.

Yet the poem ultimately does end with the destruction of Troy and the death of her King. This comes about because Achilles, the great champion of the Greeks, finally decided to enter the fight, to slay the enemies of his people, and to burn down the great metropolis.

But he did not do this because he had a change of heart. It is not that he decided that loyalty to his allies was more important than his honor. Not at all. Rather his friend, his dear friend, whom he loved, Patroclus, whom he had known from childhood, was killed by the Trojan Hector.

Filled with hatred and wrath against anyone who would harm his friend, he came forth, and destroyed the Trojans, and all they had.

For this reason, the poem begins with the words, 'Rage, goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles.' For it was rage, in the end, that broke down the gates of

mighty Troy, and slew its king, and sacked its citadel.

Now why do I bring this up? Why dally on about ancient poems about friendship and wrath when we have just read in St. John that we must '*abide in Christ's love?*'

I bring this up to illustrate a simple truth, that love and hatred are two sides of the same thing, and for a simple reason, that one only hates that which opposes what one loves. One may hate lawlessness, but only because he loves the law. One may hate slavery, but only because he loves freedom. One may hate the one who insults him, but only because he loves himself.

We hear much about 'hate' today. It has even become a sort of social and political mantra. We are all to stop 'hate', and pop music regularly calls out the proverbial 'haters.' Yet no one asks the question of where the hate comes from; what is it that the one who hates first loves?

The rage of Achilles which 'cast down to the house of death innumerable souls' was born from his love of his friend. That love for the blood of his companion produced the wrath of judgment that would flow forth against the Trojans, and all of their works, and all of their ways.

Our Lord descended into this mortal world. He descended '*not to bring peace, but a sword.*' He descended to '*cast fire on the earth, and would that it be kindled already.*'

Everywhere He goes, He destroys the work of Satan. Where there is disease, He heals it, for man was never meant to know sickness. Where there were wretches tortured by demons, He exorcised them, for man was never meant to know domination by any created thing. Where He found sin, He forgave it, that man may no longer be separated from God.

By His very word, He destroys these works, and ever shall destroy them. From then, until the end of time, every baptism, every prayer, every Eucharist, is a death-destroying weapon unsheathed against the devil. It is not for no reason that it is written that from the mouth of Christ proceeds a double edged sword. Indeed, His word is a tool of violence, '*the sword of the Spirit*', our only defense against hell.

Yet it was not enough that our Lord merely wander the earth, casting out demons and healing illness. It was not enough, for it did not satisfy *'the wrath that was to come.'* These were but skirmishes upon the open field. It is the throne of hell and the Prince of Demons that is the true target of His wrath.

So that this, our great champion, the Christ, might complete his vengeance, He rose up upon a cross, that by dying a mortal death, He might descend into the land of the mortal dead.

Know now, that it was rage that broke down the gates of hell, and slew its king, and sacked its citadel. It was rage against these that freed us from our ancient enemies: sin, death, and the devil. And this wrath should not surprise us, for it has *'been revealed from heaven'*, even as it is written *'vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.'*

Our Lord is a man of war. And not just that, but a Lord who *'hates the wicked'*, and it is the root of this ancient wickedness, that has so tormented and scourged humanity, that He has come to destroy.

It may shock us to think of our Lord, so often posed with a child and lamb in His arms, as on a mission of invasion, conquest, and final victory. But it should not, as it should not have shocked anyone when Achilles attacked Troy upon the death of Patroclus. For the devil in the beginning had destroyed the very image of God and desecrated it in bringing sin and death into the world through Adam. It should not surprise us that the Lord comes seeking vengeance, then, and now, and forevermore. For He looked upon His saints, His disciples, we men fallen upon the field who cannot avenge ourselves, and said to them simply:

'Ye are my friends.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Acts 10:34-48; 1 John 5:1-8; John 15:9-17.