

Sermon: Antidotes to Errant Knowledge**Scripture: Psalm 139 and MLK Jr. quote from “Strength to Love”****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: January 17, 2021**

Thank you for those readings Katie and thank you, for your contribution to the upward thrust of goodness in this world through your frontline nursing work with Boston Children’s Hospital. But what do we do with the downward pull of evil in the world, some of which we witnessed at the capitol this week? And what do we do with the fact that rarely if ever do those participating in what we would see as such downward thrusts in the world believe they are participating in evil but rather that they fight on the side of good, doing what they do to counter the evil that we support. But who has the knowledge to define that?

In Greek the word for knowledge is “gnosis” and over the course of Christian history there have been particular streams of thought, belief and practice that came to be known as Gnostic Christian. Gnosticism is an umbrella term for all those groups, sects, cults over the ages that have had a similar approach to their Christian faith and practice that is centered on there being a class of spiritual elite humans who have the knowledge, the gnosis, that others don’t. There are many variant beliefs within gnostic thought but the secret knowledge of a special people remains constant across groups for the most part as well as two other general beliefs – that the material world is corrupt and evil and obscures truth and goodness. Coupled with that is also some sense of the creator of this corrupt world being itself a corrupt deity or demiurge that works to thwart the purity and goodness of the one Supreme and unknowable true God. Most gnostic adherents therefore while proclaiming they are Christian would not

believe that Jesus was fully God and fully man because how could God take on corrupt materiality. They instead claim for instance that Jesus was only human in *appearance* and was fully God. There are also gnostic texts that competed with the books we now find in our Bible and some of them were found in this past century in Egypt like the Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Judas, and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene. That's a very quick hit on Gnosticism and it was one of the very first controversies faced by the early church and probably the first officially labeled a heresy.

Now some say it was fought against and labeled a heresy and the texts eliminated because it was a distortion of fundamental Christian truth while others say it was labeled a heresy and suppressed because it challenged the authority of the Catholic Church, the implication of a spiritual elite have special knowledge that most others don't was that it threatened the authority structure of the church. If you read the book *The Davinci Code* when it came out back in 2003 then you read this theory of the suppression of gnosticism in fictionalized form. If you know anything about Heaven's Gate, there's now a documentary about it on HBO, then you know something about a modern gnostic cult from about 20 years ago.

But to cut to the chase, a typically gnostic belief would be that they have the knowledge that the majority of people don't have about what is good and what it is evil and the majority of people are being greatly deceived by the authority structures around them which are either ignorantly being pawns of the workings of evil or they are quite consciously in cahoots with evil just well behind the scenes of what most of us are seeing and knowing. One might call it a kind of "deep state" in operation.

So you might see where this is going. There is a Dartmouth English professor named Jeff Sharlet who has theorized that modern day conspiracy theories like QAnon and others who stormed the capitol last week are operating within the thought-scape of Gnosticism. He lays out his case in a Vanity Fair article, and we've put the link in the description box just under this Youtube video. Consistent with gnostic thought is that the spiritual elite insiders who have the true gnosis or knowledge know something that the rest of us don't and one of those things is that the those who run the show are behind the scenes either agents of evil or being manipulated by spirits of evil.

And so there is this strange and disturbing intersection between politics and theology today that's worth our coming to know more about at least whatever we come to believe about it. I don't know, maybe such has always been the case with politics and theology, but as Christians we should be aware of it and wary of it. Maybe it's even worth our studying Gnosticism together at some point soon because what I've given you here is a very very thin account of it. But at the very least what the situation requires of us is to return again and again to grounding ourselves in the heart of our faith so that with all this noise and chaos and all the vying for who is on the side of truth and goodness in our collective lives we don't get drawn too far away from the heart of our Christian faith.

And there are three tenets of foundational Christianity that I think can help to ensure that we are participating in the upward thrust towards good and act as antidote to the downward thrust of evil which we can be drawn into if we are not careful. And handily enough, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is a Christian figure in our national history that can lead us to those 3 quite well. The first is the primacy

of love and love knows no violence. The second is holding steadfast to all people being children of God. And the third is the practice of Christian humility.

First of all the primacy of love. Martin Luther King had an incredible way of cutting through all the noise and returning to the heart of the faith. He said at one point along his way which was so full of trial and tribulation, people around him so full of hatred and fear, many who believed he was not serving good but evil, and in the midst of it all he said this “I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.” But Martin Luther King Jr.’s love ethic was based upon Jesus’ love ethic which meant that he wasn’t talking about soft and squishy feelings of love but rather a powerful and exacting love that was engaging and confrontational at times and full of transformative energy, the love FORCE, which is like the force of gravity in its being a law of the world which we can certainly counter but ultimately wins the day. “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice” is one of the ways that King names the love force. On both extremes of the political spectrum are dire warnings about the coming destruction of all we hold dear whether that’s from a corrupt deep state or a climate catastrophe and the temptation when you frame things like that is to stop at nothing to stop the other from causing that destruction, but as followers of Jesus we are not afforded that option. We MUST stop at something and that is we cannot allow hate and fear to drive us towards violence against the other, even if they are doing violence towards us. That is not the way of Jesus. “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate,” King said, “adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.”

Secondly, Martin Luther King Jr was not a gnostic in any way but his theology was deeply incarnational. Jesus Christ for Martin Luther King and

historical mainline Christianity was a profound affirmation of the true blessedness of this material world. All children are children of God because God became a child in Jesus Christ, fully god and fully man. Theologically this led King to confront the American heresy that some people deserve rights, benefits and privileges more than other people, a heresy that became attached to skin pigment and was baked into our nation from its founding due to the genocide of native peoples and the enslavement of Africans. Instead, we must hold foundational to our theology that all are God's beloved children deserving of equal treatment and justice and act accordingly towards the end of manifesting God's beloved community.

And finally, maybe the most important of antidote to errant ways of thinking as Christians in this time is to actively work on our own humility, understanding that the downward thrust of evil and ignorance is never just out there but is always also within us. Gandhi was once known to have said – “the only devils in this world are running around in our own hearts, and that's where our battles should be fought.” It's not special esoteric knowledge that we need for our salvation but it's confession and repentance, turning once again to Jesus. When we are feeling particularly maddened by “the other side” and how wrong and ignorant they are, a really good response, actually a response required by our faith is to stop and confess our own sinfulness. MLK Jr. was not a saint and likely would resist anyone suggesting such since he had a healthy sense of his own sinfulness and his own capacity to be deceived about his own righteousness. For him the antidote was to keep his eyes trained on the cross of Christ. And so I end this sermon on this note with the words that he used to end one of his sermons entitled “Love in Action.”

Every time I look at the cross I am reminded of the greatness of God and the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. I am reminded of the beauty of sacrificial love and the majesty of unswerving devotion to truth. But somehow I can never turn my eyes from that cross without also realizing that it symbolizes a strange mixture of greatness and smallness, good and evil. As I behold that uplifted cross I am reminded not only of the unlimited power of God, but also of the sordid weakness of man. I think not only of the radiance of the divine but also of the tang of the human. I am not only reminded of Christ at his best but humanity at its worst. We must see the cross as the magnificent symbol of love conquering hate and of light overcoming darkness. But in the midst of this glowing affirmation, let us never forget that our Lord and Master was nailed to that cross because of human blindness. Those who crucified him knew not what they did.

- MLK Jr. in *Strength to Love*, p. 45-46

May we pray for the eyes to see truthfully and hearts to love fully in these days of tribulation. Amen.