

Sermon: Choice of 2 Cities?

Scripture: Ephesians 2

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One of the most famous and influential books of Christian literature, just behind that of the Bible itself was written in the 5th century by an African man named Augustine of Hippo. The book is called “The City of God”. In it Augustine explains human history as a conflict between 2 cities that co-exist on earth – the Heavenly City or the City of God and the Earthly City or the City of Man. Each city is distinguished by what it is they love, the earthly city is marked or marred, you might say, by self-love and the Heavenly City by the love of God. We know well the Earthly City which can be traced back to a moment of violence in the story of Cain who killed his brother Abel and it is a way of relating to one another beset by scarce goods, competition, violence, and domination of one over another. But we also know the reality of what Augustine calls the Heavenly City which was God’s original intention from the genesis of creation and is marked by flourishing and unity, love, forgiveness and cooperation, and nonviolence.

Both cities see the primary human problem as disunity and the goal as unity. The Earthly City though which so often holds sway seeks and creates unity through the violence of war and the extinguishing of enemies and domination of the other, while the Heavenly City creates unity through divine self-emptying and self-sacrifice, i.e. Jesus on the cross. As Christine read, Paul describes in Ephesians that Christ’s sacrifice “broke down the dividing wall, the hostility between us and created within himself one new humanity.” The City of God, as Augustine describes it, has Christ at the center, the sacrificing, loving, forgiving, nonviolent Christ through whom eventually all will be brought back together from their

division and exile into the body of Christ. But what still holds sway for the time being is the City of Man which has at its center whoever holds the power at the time and maintains that power by dominating everyone else. The Earthly City, however, is destined for destruction and in the end it is the Heavenly City with Christ as its Sovereign that will win the day. In the end, as Rob Bell puts it, Love Wins!

Augustine's treatise focuses on the human element within creation and specifically that of the violence of enemy-making and warfare, but it is not a far stretch to consider how that same City of Man attitude of dominion and domination also mars God's beloved creation as well, almost as if one of our enemies that we had to dominate and subdue is the earth and her creatures themselves. Watch any documentary about the factory farms where our meat comes from and see the violence of the City of Man in bold and horrific relief, to say nothing of clear cut old growth forests and dead brown coral reefs of the ocean.

One of the big lies buried in our hearts that tends to distort our lives is that to secure our own well-being and create unity with others we must have an enemy and achieve dominion over said enemy, whether that's other humans who are different from us or the earth that is separate from us. Somewhere along the way in human history, Christians call it the fall, there came a point at which our peaceful, flourishing equitable, unified human lives became distorted by division, rivalry, and violence manifest by enmity and violence between humans and between the human being and the earth. As it makes clear in Genesis, the earth herself was experienced as something that we had to dominate and contend with and extract what we wanted from instead of a relationship of mutual nonviolence give and take. Somewhere along the way, we decided that through violence towards our animal siblings we must feed ourselves and through violence towards the earth we must dredge up and saw down the sources of energy we needed for our purpose, all

acts based upon a mentality and a worldview of scarcity rather than the truth of abundance which is how God in fact actually made the world.

But as Christian theology explains it, this was not ultimately God's intention for the world and something had to be done to counter this domination mentality and re-create the original intention of unity. This is what Christ's sacrifice on the cross intended to do. The Divinity, God Godself, instead of dominating his creation and beating them into submission, submitted Himself/Herself/Godself to this tyrannical force of evil and violence in the world, received it into his own body and Jesus held it to the cross at his own expense, brought it with him down for the harrowing of Hell and when he arose brought only love, forgiveness, healing, and peace. He drew people unto him, through his sacrifice, in order to create a new humanity unified in Him... no longer defined by or requiring violence and domination to protect itself or advance itself but rather a humanity defined solely by love. Would that it would be that this was truly the end of the story, but we know only too well that the self-proclaimed followers of Jesus and even the church itself at times has been more aligned to the City of Man than it has to the City of God. But still the civilian core of the people united in Christ in the Heavenly City here on earth is real and true and very present, and the hope or the aim, is that you and I are – or can be, or at times are - citizens of the City of God and eschew the city of man. Maybe we all at times can be citizens of the City of Heaven when we find ourselves generously sharing our abundance where its scarce for others, pressing for a common good even though it doesn't serve us as well, making the difficult choices for what's good and right. And maybe at other times, we are citizens of the City of Man protecting our privilege or jockeying for position or dominating others to serve ourselves or opting for convenience over conservation or control over care or domination over service, or exclusion over inclusion.

But when we come to this table, you see, we are having a meal that has been squarely prepared and set in the City of God with that city's King or Lord presiding, Jesus Christ, not at the head of the table and all of us in descending order based upon our worthiness, but this Lord and King and Sovereign has become the food that is to be taken at this table, not to Lord over us but to enter into us, become a part of us and us to be a part of him. The violence has already been done and received by the host, himself, so we no longer must operate that way, we can be united not through dominion and violence but through vulnerability and love. And having partaken of this meal, this ridiculously small cup and tiny wafer that we all receive in equal measure we are not only conjoined together, united together but we also then share in the purposes of our Lord and Sovereign which is simply to create more unity through love and vulnerability and to eschew all domination and violence. Of course, we know that. We know who our Lord is and that he does not lord or dominate over, but dwells with and within in service to all. We know this, the only question is how do we live it more fully and faithfully in our day to day lives.

I'll end with an invitation to suspicion of ourselves, offering just a few red flags you might call them that could help us note when we are falling into thought patterns of the City of Man and maybe that can help us traverse over to the City of God

1. We should be suspicious of ourselves when we notice that we are bonding with someone over and against another. Nothing bonds people together more than a common enemy – 2 nations against a third or two people gossiping about a third. Christ is always in the third, being crucified again.
2. We should be suspicious of ourselves when we notice envy surfacing within us finding ourselves not only desiring what another has but maybe even not wanting

the other to have it. It can be things but it can also be gifts and skills and particular relationships. “Envy,” it is said “is the art of counting another’s blessings.”

3. We should raise questioning eyebrows of ourselves when we are operating out of a zero-sum consciousness, believing that our giving for the sake of another leaves less for us; or when doing what is right and good is over-run by fear of there not being enough or fear of the future.

4. We should be leery when we get into justification mode, when we justify our choices because everyone else is doing it, or because what difference will my little choice make, or it’s ok because at least I’m not as bad as so-and-so!

5. And finally, we should at least notice if not question when we are so eager and generous in helping others, but are less open and willing to be vulnerable enough to be helped by others. If we are not careful even our helping can be a way of lifting ourselves over and above others.

Know thyself and be honest with yourself; seek love, peace, communion with one another in vulnerability because that is the pathway to abundance of life, and the acknowledgment of our own sin and complicity with the City of Man can lead us to an honest desire for the Heavenly City, the city of God. Let’s be in that city right now together as we partake in communion, in Jesus name, amen!