

All Saints' Littleton
Sunday, August 22, 2021
The Rev. Paul Higginson - Deacon

Cartoonists and I'd expect painters out there as well, have for years portrayed individuals, either standing and knocking at the gates of heaven or looking up in anticipation, in a courtroom scene, before an all powerful judge. In any and all situations they are pleading their case to be let into paradise. No doubt that is where we'll all find ourselves one day, in one scene or the other.

We've just heard a story from Joshua, one of Israel's early leaders, after he called the tribal heads and leaders of the people of Israel together, to plead their case before God. It's a black and white story he lays out for them. To the gathered tribes he cries out, "choose this day, who you will serve"! It seems until now the population has had choices as to which God or gods they were ready to follow. Would it be the gods of the Amorites from the land they are now living in, or other gods left behind in Egypt, or perhaps those of their ancestors beyond the river?

He states his personal choice and the people respond in the affirmative, of course we will follow the God who has brought us to this place out of both slavery and Egypt. It's easy to go along with the crowd, but when it all shakes out it will be because of the personal choices that we make, that on that day, we will have to account to the judge for our decisions.

I expect all of us here today would answer in the same way as the folks in Joshua's day. Still as St. Paul pointed out in his visit to Athens, the people there had statues representing many Gods. I believe if we look deeply into ourselves, as the judge will one day, we'll find a life filled with a listing of a lot more than the one God.

An example of who another god might be is, placing the quest for and chasing after wealth, above all else, far beyond what we'll ever need. I remember a student once who thought, dreamed and built his life around his car. Other gods appear when we place our undying faith at the feet of sports stars, politicians or a president. As long as people have walked the earth, even to this very day, they've worshiped stones, crystals, trees, the sun and moon. Whenever we live our lives centered on objects, self-serving goals or

other people, we tend to worship the gods of our ancestors from the other side of the river.

St. Paul, in today's second lesson, describes our allegiance to other gods as a battle with "the spiritual forces of evil among the heavenly places." It's not a struggle against flesh and blood but one with rulers and cosmic powers of the present darkness. Jesus tells us that "it is the Spirit that gives life, that flesh is useless against spiritual forces."

Of course Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as being the one that gives life. I recall a conversation I had many years ago with my friend Drew Smith, retired Bishop of CT., in regards to spirits. We of this age, with our superior technology, have for the most part disregarded the possible existence of invisible forces or spirits.

Yet as my friend pointed out to me Jesus singled out and identified the one spirit as holy, not discounting the idea that this was one spirit among the many.

St. Paul goes on to describe the armor and weaponry of a soldier as a means to thwart the powers that would lead us towards other gods. Belts of truth, breastplates of righteousness, shields of faith, helmets of salvation, swords of the spirit, the words of God and even the right footwear.

Today's soldier is probably outfitted in much the same way. Wearing a kevlar vest, instead of a breastplate and automatic bullet firing rifles have it all over swords. They ride in armor shielded vehicles, fly in planes and helicopters but all with the same intent, to defend oneself.

All of today's technological warfare advantages become quite useless unless they have fuel to run on. The soldier of today, or in centuries past, cannot do a whole lot without food or the will to fight. The old adage comes into play that, the Army marches on its stomach, rings just as true as ever. The fuel that powers and preserves our spirit, no matter how we are outfitted, is as Jesus tells us, his body and blood.

All our good intentions, our combat gear, or ways of protection fall apart, though the body is covered on the outside. Without the presence of the Holy Spirit on the inside, we will fail in our attempts to thwart those unseen powers of darkness that would lead us to follow other gods.

The question then becomes who are the other gods that want a place in your life and what can you do to deny those powers? We know when we've put on extra pounds, that appear like magic on the scale, that if we're serious we know how to shed the weight.

Depending on the weather most of us know how to dress to keep warm or dry. It becomes those unseen spirits that quietly persuade us that following something earthly will bring us to a place of contentment. Jesus says it quite simply, “abide in me”. Through the regular practice of prayer, worship and the receiving and renewing of the Holy Spirit within us, given as his own body and blood, it’s all the protection we’ll ever need. We become vaccinated to those powers, like a virus, that we cannot see.

The road ahead is a hard one whether we’re in our 8th or 80th year. Perhaps that’s why some who followed Jesus early on fell by the wayside. The things of earth present a mighty draw that would lead us apart from what our morning canticle says, “for the Lord is a great god and a king above all gods”. How many of us here this morning would rather be at the beach, catching up on stuff around the house, sleeping in? Instead, Praise God!, we’re here together charging up our Spirits for whatever the day or weeks ahead may bring.

So let us all, “Seek the Lord while he wills to be found, call upon him when he draws near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the evil ones their thoughts, and turn to the Lord for he will have compassion, and to our God for he will richly pardon.”

For not only will the Lord sustain and protect us when we abide in him, just as importantly is the knowledge that when we stray, and it’s a case of when, not if, he will richly pardon us. Then he leads us back into the fold, for when we choose to make God our God we truly become, the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand”. Oh, that today we might harken to his voice! Amen