

June 22, 2025
Proper 7, Year C
The Rev. Jack Alvey

You've probably heard the phrase, "divide and conquer." In modern day usage, the phrase is typically used when someone is trying to motivate a group to do something quickly. We only have 10 minutes to spend in the grocery store to get these 50 items. Let's divide and conquer. We have to get this house cleaned up before Mom and Dad get home. Divide and conquer.

The phrase is more appropriately applied to a political strategy that has been employed by just about every major world power since the dawn of civilization. The idea is to divert blame from the corruption of the ruling class by exploiting the differences between the general population.

The ruling class's rational says, "If they are too busy fighting each other, then they won't notice how we are taking advantage of them. They'll blame each other for the world's problems, and we'll win by making them defeat each other. And, when the time is right, we can swoop in, be the hero, and maintain power."

The "divide and conquer" strategy was alive and well during the time of Jesus. As you know, the Roman Empire occupied what we generally refer to as the Middle East during the time of Jesus. One way the Romans maintained control of the region, was by encouraging the divisions that already existed between the Jews and Gentiles.

As long as the Jews and Gentiles were fighting each other, they wouldn't pose a threat to Roman occupation in the Middle East. They couldn't amass enough strength to start a revolution. While the Romans didn't create the divisions between the Jews and Gentiles, they made sure to keep those divisions alive by adding fuel to the fire.

It'd be pretty tone deaf of me if I didn't stop and acknowledge the hostilities taking place in that same part of the world today. With last night's bombing of Iran, our own country has entered into this conflict in a more pronounced way. Obviously, this has created a heightened sense of anxiety and uncertainty for the future of our country and the world. May God have mercy on us all.

This action by the United States has already highlighted the deep political chasm that already exists in our country. One side of the country is celebrating this action, while the other is condemning U.S. intervention. While there are certainly many reasons to disagree, we should be careful not to turn those on the other side of the aisle into the enemy. If we do turn the other into the enemy, then the real enemy has won. More on the real enemy later.

In case you are wondering, Gentiles are simply non-Jews. Technically speaking, most of us in this room are Gentiles. We are the product of a Gentile version of Christianity. It was St. Paul, the writer of today's lesson to the Galatians, who helped foster reconciliation between Jew and Gentile using the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The division between Jews and Gentiles wasn't unique as it speaks to a universal truth about the nature of humanity. We are naturally divisive. We constantly find ways to make distinctions between us and them. We do this, in part, to figure out who we are in the world. We also do this as an evolutionary self-defense tactic – to be wary of the other.

Making these distinctions aren't inherently bad. The problem lies in how we use these distinctions. Problems arise when we weaponize these distinctions, when we assign value judgments to these distinctions; when we say, Jews are greater than Gentiles, men are greater than women, free people are greater than enslaved people.

We do this in our own time and place. In the Western world, we say that rich people are more important than poor people. White people are more important than people of color. Professional athletes are more important than public servants.

We say that entertainers are more important than teachers. In the church, we believe clergy are more important than laity. Christians are better than fill in the blank religion. All these value judgments are lies and only serve to create division and keep the real enemy in power.

We typically start to attach value judgments to these external distinctions in elementary school. These external distinctions and value judgments intensify through middle school and high school. If you have a teenager, you should never tire of reminding them of the truism, "comparison is the thief of joy."

I remember a friend telling me that if I wanted to be popular in junior high, I needed a girlfriend. I believed the lie. I asked a girl that I didn't even like to "go out" with me. She said, "no." And for three years, I lived by the lie that I wasn't good enough. To cope with this feeling of inadequacy, I'd often think stuff like, "at least I'm better than them."

And that is how the enemy wins, by convincing us that we aren't good enough – that we are less than; and, at the same time, by convincing us that we are better than – that we are greater than or more superior. You might be wondering, "if the enemy isn't them, then who is the enemy?" The enemy is the one who convinces us that the "other" is the enemy.

The enemy are the forces of evil that convince us to believe these value judgments, these lies about ourselves and about the other. In the Bible, we hear words like Satan or the devil or demonic spirits to describe the ultimate enemy. In a post-enlightened, twenty-first century world, we tend to shy away from these seemingly primitive observations about the world.

For the most part, our modern world has dismissed the idea of evil spirits or the devil. We tend to like neat, tidy scientific explanations that we can understand. But there are some things we will never be able to wrap our minds around. That doesn't mean we should dismiss those things.

Someone once said, "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he doesn't exist." When we don't believe that evil spirits are at work in the world, we tend to assign blame to the other. All the while, these forces of evil are behind the scenes employing the divide and conquer strategy.

This doesn't mean, however, that we shouldn't be held accountable for acting on the lies of the evil one. The devil made me do it is a poor excuse. If that excuse didn't work for Adam and Eve, why should it work for us today?

Over the next few weeks, we will be using a form of confession that calls us to repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf. We cannot truly repent of the evil that we are complicit in perpetuating without the help and power of the Holy Spirit.

This past week at Vacation Bible School (VBS) we explored with the children how to cultivate the fruits of the Spirit in our own lives. As these fruits grow in our own lives, they have the power to choke out the weeds or the evil that exists in the world inside of us and the world around us.

That said, when writing or speaking about U.S. intervention in Iran, I pray that you make sure to tend to your soul, that your words and actions are reflective of the fruits of the Spirit. Let the Holy Spirit choke out the weeds that the evil spirits want to sow in your life and the life of the world.

Next week, our lectionary cycle will also invite us to reflect on the fruits of the Spirit. In a nutshell, Paul is telling us that the Holy Spirit is planting the seeds of these fruits in our hearts. These seeds begin to grow and flourish when we spend time with Jesus who is the light of the world and the living water.

As these seeds begin to bear fruit, the weeds inside of us and around us begin to get starved out. As these fruits begin to grow in us and in our congregations and in our communities, the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf begins to shrink back and wither.

Even the best gardeners know that we cannot completely eradicate weeds from a garden. They'll always be more weeds to pull. Likewise, evil will not be completely eradicated until Christ comes again to deal with it once and for all.

However, the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – these fruits do help contain evil and prevents it from taking over our world and the world around us.

These fruits also inspire hope in world filled with weeds. These fruits are living proof that there is something better ahead. There is a day when all shall be well. Until that last day when evil is eradicated once and for all, the power of Christ's love and the community of the faithful have the power to contain evil through the fruits of the Spirit.

As these various fruits begin to grow in our lives and communities, we begin to see that our differences are meant to complement each other – not divide. We start to see that the mission and ministry of Christ means to defeat the enemy not by dividing but by uniting, by recognizing the unique gifts in the other, by trusting that no one is any more or less important than the other. We are all God's beloved children. And when we all find our identity in Christ, there is nothing we cannot overcome in this world including the lies of the enemy. Amen.