

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator, from our Savior Jesus Christ and from the life-giving, in-dwelling Holy Spirit. AMEN

There's nothing like a text full of words like "abominations" and "impurities" and "fornication" to get the day started, is there? And to top it off, one of the great biblical lines of all time, "5 and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations.' I can assure you that every pastor - especially those of us who work with youth and families - can't wait to have this as our preaching text.

Obviously I jest, but as Luther Seminary Professor Craig Koester writes in his commentary on this text, "The imagery [of Revelation 19] describes the seductive power of materialism and society's fascination with violence. The picture is designed to startle people into seeing how the currents in society draw people into a web of relationships that are *degrading*."

- A) Yep, the imagery is still startling: I am uncomfortable standing up here talking about harlots and prostitutes and fornication not only because I am socially conditioned to be uncomfortable standing in front of a large group of mixed genders and mixed ages utilizing sexually explicit imagery, but also because as a feminist I am more than rankled by the biblical insistence of consistently equating women and women's sexuality with wantonness, lust, avarice, greed, over-consumption, lack of control, and pure evil. We have got to rethink this imagery and find a way to remove it, debunk it and at the very least have more open, honest and significant conversations about it and the way it very truly creates, endorses and encourages the degradation of women in the here and now.
- B) I am struck by Koester's choice of words: "alluring", "seductive", "fascination", "currents", "draw into" and "web". All of these are aptly descriptive of the scenario depicted in Revelation 19:19 - and they are powerfully descriptive of the experienced reality of the Beast in modern society. In these words we glimpse a reality that has not changed since John recorded this Revelation nearly 2000 years ago: the Beast's temptations are extraordinarily subtle, yet, at the same time, we humans are easily coerced, lured, and drawn into their net.
- C) In Koester's analysis - and Koester is pretty much always right - "Degrading relationships" are the antithesis of God's culture. Importantly, the relationships that can become degraded or be degrading include our relationship with God, with other human beings, with God's creation, and with our selves.
- D) The antidote to degrading relationships are healthy relationships: relationships that are faithful and true.

But maintaining faithful, true relationships with God, creation, other humans and self does not come easily. Mark Weinhandl has suggested that we read *The Screwtape Letters* together. I hope that a Peace-Full night adult Small Group decides to do so. In this small but mighty book, C.S. Lewis introduces Screwtape - one of a multitude of demons who are sent into the world to foil

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## Revelation 17:1-6; 19:11-16

relationships and generally cause distress. The tactics of this demon are brilliantly revealed in Screwtape's letters back to his boss: the tactics are supremely subtle and nefarious - and always directed at corroding and corrupting relationships that have been healthy and life-giving.

And this may be the limitation of John's metaphor of the Great Beast: it depicts evil as this enormity, this raging monster that is somewhere out there in the world doing great and horrific things that we can all see and readily label as "evil". But the point of the imagery, as Koester notes, is the insidious evil that lurks within us and within our relationships, twisting us and our alliances into sources of degradation rather than bastions of healing and encouragement.

Unfortunately, allowing relations to degrade too often seems appropriate: when we hear and read the news: earthquakes in Italy, tornadoes in the Midwest, floods in Iowa and Louisiana - and a "tropical disturbance" on its way; the vagaries of the natural world align with the tumultuous reality of a society in which terrorism and wars, police violence and political hate-and fear-mongering collide with the very real uncertainties of our daily lives and we find ourselves overwhelmed, drowning, we might say, in the Beast's temptations to pull away from the world, to pull away from our neighbors, to tuck ourselves into a perceived little cocoon where the world is not changing, where conflict does not appear to exist and where life can remain as "normal" as possible.

How can we resist this extraordinary pull? How can we combat the surge of our entire society to further degrade our relationships as we deny our role in climate change, evade our responsibilities to the citizens of the world, avoid engaging in the politics of our nation, and passively assist in the destruction of our young people? As Christians, we know this is not our calling, but the Beast's temptations are subtle and strong.

How can we resist this extraordinary pull? Engage. Be church. Be church on purpose. Purposely build up relationships. Intentionally develop closeness with others. If the picture of the Harlot and the Beast is shocking to us, it is meant to be! Let this bizarre and disturbing imagery open our eyes to see how currents in our society "draw people into a web of relationships that are *degrading*." And having seen the lures and temptations of the Beast for what they are, counter-act them: develop solid relationships, dive into partnership with others, be uplifted and lift people up.

This is our opportunity at Peace in the coming program year. We'll discuss it at length in today's forum. We are inviting this whole congregation to be church on purpose by becoming a Bible Buddy. We are inviting the whole congregation to enter into intentionally encouraging relationships: share your concerns and your dreams and hopes with someone from another generation and learn resilience together. Hold one another accountable in your faith journeys and grow stronger in faith together. Listen and see and share where God's biblical story intersects with the story of your life and your Buddy's life and learn to notice how God is at work, right now, counter-acting the Beast with relationships built on joy, peace, justice, equity,

collegiality and love. Be a Bible Buddy and live out your baptismal vocation to live among God's faithful people.

The armies of heaven in our text are described as miniature mirror images of the Rider on the white horse, who is called Faithful and True. If relationships that are degrading are the antithesis of God's culture, then relationships that are Faithful and True are the antidote; relationships that are Faithful and True are the epitome of God's culture. We intend to build these relationships: we are asking every member of this congregation to become a Bible Buddy: a partnership between one or two other people which is built on the Word of God.

David Kleppe sent me some photos he took during Family Camp, two weekends ago, and with those photos came this extremely powerful reflection. He gave me permission to share it.

David wrote:

*Nothing quite like outdoor worship, not of nature, but in nature without a roof. Seems Jesus did a lot of his teaching in the great outdoors, probably near a scrubby not too pretty mustard tree or on a bluff or hill described as a mountain for effect. Or on the road, probably Mary and some of the women managed to get beside him to the chagrin of the male disciples, or rather Jesus went out of his way to walk with them, enjoying their understanding. Or on the boat about to capsize in a storm, which I can relate to now after nearly drowning last Saturday afternoon a yard short of the ladder on the dock—out of breath and fatigued, flopping onto the deck like a fish out of water so that I might understand anew what baptism is—dying and given new life, whew! I swear, another few seconds or so I would have gone under, but I was aware several folks on the dock had their hands out and were ready to dive in, Whoa!, that's community. So that set the stage for worshipping with the youth a few hours later and as we sang some lovely faithful ballads it seemed as if I was singing in a chord like OM, my whole body from head to toe was vibrating and my voice was not my own, but belonged to something or someone else. I mean, after all, the wind was a gentle breeze, ruach/pneuma. Ahh, the good old outdoors, what a scene. The presence of others became social life abundant. I don't know how else to say it.*

I don't know think you need to find a different way to say it, David: in this little note you sum up reconciled relationships across the board: worshiping in and with nature and seeing God present there, acknowledging Jesus' abiding intention to welcome, walk with and honor the outcast and the unheard, knowing yourself to be a baptized, beloved child of God - not just in the abstract, but in a visceral, real way. Reconciling the limitations of your body with the strength of the wider community, even as you later experienced an extraordinary unity between your psychological, emotional, spiritual and physical self resonating with the nature and community around you. Knowing yourself to be held and beloved through the community by the God who has named and claimed you in your baptismal birth - and through that birth has brought you into a new and abundant life. I'd say you covered it pretty well!

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And all this unity, all this awareness of our belonging and our belovedness, all this healing of relationships with creation, with our own selves, with our neighbors - this is what we intend through Bible Buddies. Through Bible Buddies we hope to foster and encourage relationships that will heal and uplift, empower and nurture, develop wonder in the world and seed a sense of belonging deep in each soul.

The Beast is subtle. The world is overwhelming. Our own bodies can belie us. It is extraordinarily easy to want to withdraw and to let relationships crumble and decay - or worse, participate in relationships that are degrading. This is the antithesis of God's culture; this is the evil combatted by the Rider on the White Horse, who is known as Faithful and True. Let's decide as a congregation that we are going to join this army, surging forth from heaven on their white horses, to battle - not with any weapons, but with the Word of God, with words of grace and welcome, of healing and belonging, words of encouragement and nourishment for the soul - let's decide as a congregation to become more and more a place where relationships are uplifting - on purpose - where belonging is offered and received and known in the soul, where all of us who are drowning in our day to day realities can see the willing hands of helpers at the ready and a safe deck to flop onto - to know and experience our baptismal birth anew.

AMEN