***“Take Him by Force***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, July 25, 2021

[**Ephesians 3:14–19**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=211)

14For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, 17and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

[**John 6:1–15**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=211)

1After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee . . . 2A large crowd kept following him . . . 5When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” 6He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. 7Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” 8One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, 9“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” 10Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. 11Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. 12When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” 13So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. 14When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

15 When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Jesus keeps getting pursued by crowds. Last week we had him trying to escape from the crowd to get some rest with his apostles. “They had no leisure even to eat” (Mark 6:31). This week they’re pursued by a Galilean crowd that is so avid they are ready to take Jesus by force and make him king. Here was a wonder-worker who could provide food for the masses, and was obviously a leader. Let’s make him king! I do not doubt he could have used this movement to lead a successful insurrection against the Roman and Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. But Jesus was not that kind of king, and he walked away from the crowd and their ambitions. This is not how *his* kingdom spreads.

How should we understand the crowd’s motive? It is understandable that they should want a wonder-working prophet to be their leader. But it also shows a regrettable human characteristic, the tendency to go for bread and circuses. That their desires are out of balance is shown by the fact that they are going to take him “by force.” Such aggression shows that they have lost the spiritual focus; they are not on point.

Later in the chapter the crowd finds him again, and he says to them “I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life” (6:26–27). In other words, be spiritually minded rather than material minded. What does that really mean? What is spirit? We can experience spiritual realities in most realms of our life. Spirit in personal relationships manifests as love. . . Spirit as experienced in the mind shows up as wisdom and truth. Spirit in the realm of ethics is goodness. Spirit in relation to forms and spatial realities is experienced as spiritual beauty. The experience of deep inner peace is a spiritual encounter.

Early Christians cultivated each of these perceptions. However, they sometimes were out of balance, putting too much emphasis on truth, for instance, laudably exploring the truth about the Incarnation of the Son, but then rigidly deciding that those who thought differently were evil. Then did earnest Christians persecute and even kill other earnest Christians who had a different understanding of the divinity of Christ. This shows that there is another value that Spirit encourages, but which humans often lose, namely *balance*. Unbalanced and rigid seriousness about one aspect of spirit leads to a disconnection from the Spirit, and to unspiritual behavior. Human ambition and lust for power always lead people towards cruelty and away from the Spirit.

One of the important features of the character of Jesus was his serene balance, his calm and sane composure. Some of his remarks were designed to pull back his followers from an out-of-balance leaning in one direction. Thus did he make such unexpected remarks as “why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Luke 18:19) when someone was treating him like a hero, and “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” when his apostles were rebuking children for drawing near to him (Luke 18:17).

So living the enlightened and spiritually-minded life involves balancing many aspects of spiritual living. The Ephesians passage offers considerable wisdom about how to do this. The author prays “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love” (3:17). If you are grounded in love, then you won’t commit those ethical infractions. He offers advice about drawing strength from the Spirit: “May [God] grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit” (3:16). We can always pray to be strengthened this way.

I am blown away by this masterful sentence where he talks about putting it all together: “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:18–19). The breadth, length, height, and depth probably refer to all the different aspects of spirit: love, wisdom, truth, goodness, beauty, harmony, and balance.

Spirit calls for *everything* in balance. Jesus balanced his power with his compassion and approachability. Spiritual truth needs to be balanced with tenderness of attitude. Knowledge needs to be balanced with compassion. His kingdom spreads through truth and goodness in supreme harmony, drawing and persuading people, rather than forcing them. When people get used to the spiritual qualities, these things will become more obvious. When their eyes, their heart, and mind are opened, then they perceive and receive. There will be no temptation to try to force people to be good. People’s inner desire for spiritual goodness will naturally lead them to seek the Truth.

A spiritual writer from the 1930s, Rufus Jones, wrote “In the world of matter ends are attained by the push and correlation of forces. In the realm of the Spirit progress and realization are achieved only by the suggestion and appeal of an end or goal that works by attraction. *The compulsion of a soul* is as much a contradiction of terms as the persuasion of a stone wall by argument would be” (*A Preface to Christian Faith in a New Age*, 119). He writes about the persuasive power of “the appeal of love” (120), which changed people’s lives. And it still is changing lives today.

God’s love empowers us. Ephesians says that “every family in heaven and on earth takes its name” from the Father (3:15). We can reflect his love in our relationships. Be grounded in that love. Share and grow that love, so “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love” (Eph 3:17). Be rooted and grounded, and let love blossom in you and your family . . . and beyond!