

May 7, 2017
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II Timothy 1:1-14
Use the force!

You may not have realized it, but this Wednesday was a holiday: the fourth of May, otherwise known as Star Wars Day. You may have simply thought that some folks with lisps were feeling extra friendly, if you were greeted with: “May the Fourth be with you!”

In Star Wars, the Fourth/Force is *“an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together”* (Obi-Wan Kenobi). Some beings were sensitive to the Force, and able to channel it through themselves in seemingly miraculous ways. But even for those not sensitive to the Force, its presence and power and influence were respected and desired. Thus the greeting: “May the Force be with you.” Or, once a year, in the first week of May: “May the Fourth be with you.”

In the Star Wars universe, The Force itself is neither good nor evil, but can be used for good or evil purposes. There were practitioners of the Force on both “The Light Side” and “The Dark Side.” Jedi knights and Sith lords were sometimes from the same families. The Force being with you (or your effort) was seen as a boon or blessing or buff to give you a sight more accurate than your eyes, or strength past the limits of your fatigue, or insight when no way forward was clear. For practitioners of the Force, it could mean the ability to move objects or influence people using only one’s mind. (i.e. Malinda’s Jedi mind trick at the beginning of the service!).

Though I am a Star Wars fan, as the “May the Force be with you!” echoed across my Facebook page over and over again this week, I found myself feeling some frustration. The irony isn’t lost on me that so many of us so romanticize this piece of heroic fiction, imagining that if we’d lived in that time and that galaxy we, too, would have been a Jedi Knight, or at least, have been in the Rebellion. We would not have supported the Empire, that’s for sure! It’s much easier to be excited about a fictional Force being with a fictional rebellion, than to see one’s place in current events.

Can you imagine if we actually said to one another, “May the Spirit be with you!” and then actually wished that the Spirit would be with us in holy rebellion? If we actually invoked our parrot Spirit here instead of the dove?

Life recently provided me with an interesting reflection on spirit and rebellion and use of force. It happened when I was driving last month to join our Pastoral Team for our meeting with Atlantic Coast Conference so they could hear our story of congregational discernment around blessing the marriages of both same and opposite gender couples. Just as I was getting close to their office on Old Philadelphia Pike, a little 4-seater plane flew overhead, not very high up, presumably going to or from the nearby Smoketown airport.

I immediately thought of my grandfather, who had a pilot’s license. When he would come to Lancaster in his old age, he would sometimes get a friend to take him up in a Cessna and let him take the controls again for awhile. And he’d proceed to fly over to Landisville, and do a flyby of our house. That’s how we’d know that Pappy was in town.

So, when this plane flew overhead, I immediately thought of Pappy. And my first thought was a wry laugh because I'm pretty sure that the Pappy I knew would not have been happy about what I was about to say in that meeting I was going to. I wondered if it was a flyby of his spirit, giving me one last chance to correct course and return to the straight and narrow fundamentalism he believed in.

But a second possibility bloomed in my imagination, and this one produced a laugh of genuine mirth: What if that flyby was his blessing? Because we may have disagreed on the application of the Force but we were both kind of rebels against the Empire in very different ways. He felt the gates needed to be narrowed. I tend to feel like the gates should be bulldozed. We'd probably each think ourselves as the champions of the Light Side. But what we share is a willingness to "use the Force" to be a pain in the butt to the institution, when needed.

God sets before us, time and again: life or death? blessing or curse? I choose life on this one. I choose to call that flyby a blessing, albeit a strange one, given in the guise of someone who deeply disagreed with me on some really fundamental matters. But it re-kindled the gift of God in me, reminding me that I do not have a spirit of cowardice but of power and love. And this was a conviction we share.

There's also a companion phrase to, "May the Force be with you," and that phrase is not, "And also with you," although friends who are both high church Christian and geek like to say that every time, anyway! I submit that the proper companion phrase to "May the Force be with you!" is: "Use the force!"

For Luke Skywalker, that meant foregoing the scopes and targeting equipment in his trusty X-wing, and relying instead on the Force to aim the David and Goliath shot that would destroy the Death Star. "*Use the force, Luke! Let go ... trust ...*" was the voice of his Jedi Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, echoing into his present from the past because of their connection through the Force.

But what does the Force mean for the rest of us whose midi-Chlorian count won't get us into Jedi academy? Well, force exists in our world, too, not just in galaxies far, far away. And being married to a PhD in physics, I hear about forces – applied and normal and gravitational and electro-magnetic. Apparently, we all have force, for Isaac Newton tells us so.

I had the pleasure of doing a wedding for a student of Teman's soon before I moved here to Pennsylvania. The bride and groom were leery of too "religious" a wedding so I decided to try broaden my purview of what scripture could be, and used as my text for that homily Newton's Three Laws of Motion (which are printed on your bulletin covers today). I was blown away by the potential applications of those laws, which are about how we interact physically with other objects, to the ways we interact interpersonally with one another as fellow subjects.

Newton's first law of motion is: an object will remain at rest, until something comes along and exerts a force upon it.

We are constantly exerting force upon one another, merely by being in one another's presence. Any object that has mass exerts gravitational force on the objects around it. Among similar sized objects, it may seem negligible, but I think it's a good reminder that there's no such thing as complete neutrality. Our presence, the physical fact of our physical presence, is exerting force on those around us; and when it comes to those

we end up being in relationship with, they can never be at rest again, nor can we. No wonder relationship and community are so energizing ... and exhausting! We are for one another the external change that invigorates, but also grates against, the part of each of us that longs to remain at rest instead of possibly changing or moving.

How can we use that force for good?

Newton's second law of motion says: if you exert the same force on two objects of different mass, you will get different changes in motion. The effect on the smaller mass will be greater.

What does it mean to live a life in awareness of one's mass? Sometimes that can be a physical thing, although age and height and strength have been markers of social mass, too. Men, who have statistically usually outsized women, have been able to leverage physical mass and force into social mass and force in many societies in ways that haven't always been advantageous for all.

Sometimes that mass can be metaphorical. I think our grapplings with privilege could be looked at in this model of the disproportionate impact of force on objects with differing masses. Mennonites have been a sub-culture that has preferred to think of ourselves as small and comparatively force-less. But when we look at the strength of our community (inherited wealth and intact generational narratives), we must realize that we have significant mass, and do therefore also exert significant force, and are also able to withstand external force in a significant way that should make us BOLD, rather than fearful. But it requires a conscious intentionality and awareness of the force one is wielding. *II Timothy, meet Isaac Newton. Isaac Newton, meet II Timothy.*

How can we use that force for good?

Newton's Third Law of Motion says that every action or force has an equal and opposite reaction and force. In some ways this is a science version of the Golden Rule: The force that you exert on others will be exerted on you. So be mindful of how it feels to have force exerted on you. And just because you don't always feel the impact of force being exerted around you, doesn't mean that someone else isn't feeling it.

Think of the Newton's cradle from Children's Time – an odd number of spheres hang from a rod, so close that they touch one another when they're hanging at rest. If you pull one away to the side and then release it, it will hit the sphere next in line to it. The interesting thing is that the sphere it hits will appear to not be affected at all. What you will see is that the sphere at the other end of the line suddenly swings out and back. Again, the sphere that is hit directly stays still, but the first sphere in the line will swing out and back. Repeat, repeat.

You may feel comfy if you're a sphere in the middle of that cradle, but it doesn't mean that force isn't being exerted and that someone isn't being significantly disrupted. Just because you're not moved doesn't mean that you aren't a part of the force being transmitted down the line. As we talked about in Children's Time, this happens upon the exertion of "good" force and the exertion of "bad" force.

How do we use this force for good?

For we have been given a spirit of power and love, not of fear. And we live in a world where force, and the threat of force, are one of the most universal languages spoken. Whether you have a light-saber, or a nuclear arsenal, or simply the weight of whatever comparative physical or social mass/influence/privilege you have ... there are Forces with you! The Force is already with you. How will you use it?

Because I haven't geeked out quite enough in this sermon, I'm going to end with a quote from the *Lord Of The Rings*: At a critical point in that story, the hero expresses regret for the task given to him: "I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened." The wisdom given to him in return was this: "So do all who come to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us."

We may wish that these times had not come to us. We may wish that we had no force to have responsibility to use, or that our physical or social mass was less so that we were responsible for less. But we do have to decide what to do with what has been given to us – both the time and the force.

May the Force be with you. Use the Force.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d3/Newtons_cradle_animation_book_2.gif