

The Spiritual Elephant
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Erika Friesen

I love that Hebrews 12 verse, so I was delighted at the preaching team's choice of “Cloud Sourcing” as our summer theme. Today I want to play my role as part of the TUMC cloud of witnesses, by connecting my part of the cloud to the clouds of all of you. Throughout my adult life I have frequently reflected on my personal cloud of witnesses, the most potent of whom are my parents, whose faith and devotion sustained them through decades of displacement and persecution in Communist Russia.

Thereafter, this faith grounded them as they transitioned to life in Canada, and their experiences of faith grounded us, their seven children, as we negotiated our multi-ethnic, multilingual identities. That story is an important part of my past, my present, my future. Because, strange as it may seem, this 3-yr old, this 11-yr old, this 16-yr old, this 26-yr old, this 30-yr old, 40-yr old, 46-yr old, and this 50-yr old are all me, and all their/our experiences are my experiences. In the same way, these people of faith and this one and this one and this one and these two, have shared experiences that connect us all into the cloud of witnesses.

Today I'm sharing with you another important part of my personal cloud of witnesses which is a bit harder to define. Some of you know Richard and I moved to Ontario for graduate school. In my first five years in Toronto I spent a great deal of time on the 12th floor of Robarts library, in my little carrel in bottom half of the yellow section, looking west. A little more than 20 years ago, my advisor gave me a box of microfiche black and white photographs of two 13th century manuscripts, sermon collections written in French at a time when the prohibitive expense of book production meant only very important things got written down, mostly in Latin, the language of reading and writing. Books were paid for by the rich, i.e. the Church and the nobility. My advisor suggested I

might find something in these two manuscripts worth making available to the broader academic community by giving a few years of my life to processing it. I started reading and transcribing and trying to make sense of what was there, and ended up choosing a group of sermons to present with an introduction and commentary, as my dissertation.

One learns a lot in five years, so it's good to choose something one cares about as a focus for that time. I was lucky to find texts that were wild and strange, and yet familiar in that they reflected the devotion to faith that was so crucial to me as a younger person and is still so close to my heart that I have kept coming to church for fifty years and kept nurturing my connection to the Mennonite faith and to all of you.

One of the texts in my dissertation corpus is a sermon explaining how seven characteristics of the elephant model the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit which battle the seven vices. I don't remember ever hearing of these seven gifts in a Mennonite context. I heard a lot about the spiritual gifts Paul explains, that we sang about earlier. And then there are the 9 fruits of the Spirit in Galations. But in the Catechism of the Catholic Church even today (at vatican.va on the internet) the Gifts of the Holy Spirit as enumerated in Isaiah 11:2-3 play an important role in the development and nurture of a spiritual person. In any case, the number seven is pretty important: in view of all the important sevens in our experience (7 days of the week, colours of the rainbow, last words of Christ, lampstands and stars in Revelation, ...), small wonder that the readers of the Septuagint latched on to this list of 7 gifts in Isaiah 11.

Experiencing this text and connecting it to our faith is a bit like trying to see how Erika across five decades is the same person. In other words, it's a multi-faceted challenge I'm offering you. The intended audience for this text lived in northern France 800 years ago. There are also some hints that the intended audience were young adolescents, or closely

in touch with their inner young adolescent: I think you'll see what I mean during the explanation of the first gift. (I recognize the mindset which appreciates gross things). Consider the access to information of the time as a polar opposite to where we are today – not just little access to books, but few had access to literacy or to Latin, the language of literacy.

To help us, hearers in 2014, process what we hear, I'd like to invite a couple of people to chart the outline of the text as I go. You already know there will be seven points, so you can feel free to write as much as you like, or write less and doodle more, or really put whatever you like on the paper.

“Ostenderunt elephantis sanguinem uve et mori(r) ad acuendos eos in prelium.” Ces paroles sunt escrites el livre des Machabeus¹ u li estoires raconte que li pueples nostre Seigneur fu assamblés en une grief bataille contre ses anemis.

Oops, shall I read in English instead?

Sermon on *Ostenderunt elephantis*

Arsenal ms.2058 f.39v2-f.42r2

Introduction

"They offered the elephants the juice of grapes and mulberries to excite them for battle." (1. Macc. 6:34) These words are written in the book of the Maccabees where the story tells how the people of our Lord were gathered for a difficult battle against their enemies. And the book says that they brought into battle with them a type of beast which are called elephants. And these beasts are of such great strength that palaces of wood can be built on them inside which the knights ride, from where the knights fight; and it is a little timid at the beginning, but where it sees blood spilled near it, it is hardened so that it fears nothing.

This battle, according to the saint, is the figure of the state of our life. For the life

1 1.Mcc 6:34-37 et elephantis ostenderunt sanguinem uvae et mori ad acuendos eos in proelium

of a man on earth is nothing if not a battle, as Job says (?), against the world, against the flesh, against the enemy. The elephant symbolizes the just person who is necessary in the spiritual battle for himself and for others.

It so happens that animals and other creatures are not given to us only to serve us, but also to teach us. For as saint Gregory says, creation has as many words of God as it has characteristics. (?) This is why Job says to the man, "Ask the animals and they will teach you, the fish of the sea will tell you, the birds will show you." (12:7:) This is why Solomon sends the lazy person to the school of the ant to be taught. For it gathers in winter its food on which it lives in the summer. (Prov. 6:6 inverted, with allegory following) From this we can learn that in the winter of this life we must work for the food that cannot perish, as our Lord says in the Gospel. (John 6:27) And so all of creation is given to us as a teacher.

Thus we must look at seven properties of the elephant in which we are taught the seven graces of the holy Spirit by which the seven mortal sins are expelled. And these seven properties are set out by Saint Ambrose & the philosopher.

1. The first is that the elephant greatly fears two things: the one is the dragon, the other is the mouse.

a. The dragon signifies the enemy which, with the blade of its suggestion, corrupts and kills the heart which consents to its exhortation. Of this David says, "This dragon which you formed to play with him." (Ps. 103:26)

b. The mouse signifies spiritual sins and all other sins which are hidden in the heart and never come out in the open, such as delight and consent to carnal sin. And this is what we find written in the book of Kings (1.Sam. 5:6-12) that a plague came upon the land of the Philistines, that so great an infinity of mice overwhelmed them, that they killed as many as the population of five cities. For they entered their bodies through their anuses, and climbed up and ate their bowels, until the people of the land took counsel

and made breeches of skins which they tightened close to their bodies so that the mice could not hide there.

i. In this shameful manner we are taught profitably. The spiritual mice which enter from below and gnaw at the bowels are the thoughts of carnal sins which spoil the strength of the soul. And for this the remedy of the skins is necessary, which they made. The skins of mortal beasts signify the examples of the saints, who left us the skins of their examples as clothing and armour against temptations. Briefly, he makes pants of skins who takes from the saints the example of continence to guard himself against temptation. And it is a marvel that a beast so strong and proud as the elephant fears an animal so small as the mouse. But in this we are taught that small sins must terrify us, not only great ones. For the small sins multiply and often draw the soul to the great. And this is why saint Augustine says to the repentant man, "You have escaped from the great, now watch that the gravel of the small ones does not cover you." (?)

Now we have spoken of those whom the mice mount from below.

ii. But there are others whom the enter by the mouth. I say that the mouse enters from above the one who has been so led astray by the temptation of his flesh that he foolishly delights in it in his thoughts. For he eats the mouse who swallows temptation when he draws back into his memory the sins he has done or could have done. And temptation is "loié"[roused?] by these thoughts and so wakes the dog who had been sleeping and had smelled the stick with which he was beaten. These are the people who eat the mice against the commandment of the law where it says, "You shall not eat mice." (Lev. 11:29)

Now we have explained how we must fear the dragon and the mice spiritually with the elephant. And by this fear which is a gift of the holy Spirit the first sin is expelled which is pride. For fear humbles, as I have said elsewhere. (Emitte...creation f.43v2)

2. The second property of the elephant is that it is a compassionate beast. And its compassion is proved in two things: the one is that when one falls, the others have pity on him so that they do not want to leave the fallen one until someone comes by who helps him get up; the other thing in which people prize his compassion is that when the elephant sees a man wander away from his road, he brings him back and accompanies him to his path. In these two things we are taught by the second grace of the holy Spirit which is the gift of pity. And this is clear in these two things: lifting up the fallen and bringing back the lost.

a. The fallen are sinners; he falls who sins. The one who is just must raise the fallen. And just as two things are necessary when you want to raise the one who has fallen physically, so there are two things necessary for the one who has fallen spiritually.

i. The first is that the upright one must bend over and lower himself to the fallen, the other is that he must extend his hand to him. For if he extended his hand to the other but did not bend down he would never straighten him up. He who has pity and compassion for the sinner, lowers himself spiritually toward the fallen, for compassion is nothing but a leaning of the heart.

ii. Afterwards one must extend the hand. He who shows his brother a good example extends his hand to him. And this is what is signified in the book of the Acts of the apostles, that saint Peter extended his hand and lifted him up. (10:26)

Therefore, you who want to lift up another, bend down by pity. Extend the hand of good example to him, of good works. The false just man, although he extends his hand, does not lower himself toward the fallen. For saint Gregory says (?) "False justice has disdain, and the true has compassion." (Bede, comm. on Luke)

b. Afterwards pity must put the lost back on his road just as the elephant does. And this is when the man who knows what is good teaches it to the one who does not know it. For teaching the unknowing ones is bringing back the lost. And by this second gift is locked out the second sin, which is envy, which is contrary to pity.

3. The third property of the elephant is that elephants are very companionable animals, and hold together willingly. And this pertains to the third grace of the holy Spirit which is the gift of knowledge, which is a gift of grace which teaches how to live among people without scandalizing them. And this is done especially by honest conversation/interaction and moderation of words which Isidore teaches and says thus, "Do not let your mouth hang open at the wrongs of others. Watch your own vices, not those of others. Worry about your own salvation. Do not go looking for what does not belong to you. Do not desire to know of what men speak among themselves. Whoever keeps this teaching will have peace with everyone." (?) In this is the gift of knowledge which expels the third vice which is called anger. For just as the gift of knowledge makes man companionable, with the elephant, the vice of anger make man uncompanionable, with the lion.

4. The fourth property of the elephant is that it is very strong and courageous, even when it sees blood spilled before it. And for this reason the book says that they spilled red wine and mulberries to stimulate them in battle. In this we are taught the fourth grace of the holy Spirit which is the gift of strength. The gift of strength is patience in suffering evils with courage to undertake perfect goods, and this courage is excited and moved by the blood of the grape and the mulberry. This is what I call red and mulberry. The blood of the grape signifies the passion of Jesus Christ, for he was the grape which was pressed in the winepress of the cross, from which came the blood to quench the thirst of the whole world, of which he says, "Drink, all of you." (Mat. 26:27) He is the one who was signified by the grapes which the sons of Israel brought back from the promised land into the desert. The promised land signifies paradise, the desert is the world, the grape is Jesus Christ, the two men carrying (the grapes) are the two people, who were before the law and after it. They brought the grapes from the promised land to the desert

when they preached the coming of Jesus Christ from heaven to earth. And just as it was with the two porters, the one who goes ahead does not see what he is carrying, unlike the one who walks behind. So the people who were our predecessors are the ancient fathers such as the prophets and the others who did not see what they were carrying, that is Jesus Christ whom they were announcing. But those who carried afterward behind, such as the apostles, they saw him. The mulberry signifies the passion of the martyrs.

These are the two things which encourage and stimulate us in the battle against the vices, that is the blood of Jesus Christ and the blood of the martyrs, when we look at this blood with pure intention. And this is why the apostle says, "Look with the eye of your heart on Jesus who endured this accusation against himself so that we would not fail in tribulation." (?) Here the knights of our Lord must strengthen their hearts, here they must be encouraged. And this strength and this courage destroys the fourth type of vice, which is sloth, by the coming of Jesus Christ.

5. The fifth property of the elephant is that if it eats earth it dies. In this we are taught in the fifth gift of the holy Spirit which is the gift of counsel, which teaches us to renounce and despise earthly things. The one who eats earth is the one who looks for his comfort and his sufficiency in earthly things, who has turned the panting of his desire completely back. He runs into the curse of the serpent, which our Lord said to the serpent when he had deceived Eve, "You will eat earth all the days of your life." (Gen. 3:14) This is the gift of counsel which empties the heart of earth, by which the fifth vice which is called avarice is expelled.

6. The sixth property of the elephant is that it willingly goes near waters. In this we are instructed in the sixth gift which is the gift of understanding. For by the waters are meant the Scriptures, as Solomon says, "Deep is the word of the wise man and is the abundant fountain of wisdom." (Sir. 21:6) The heart of the wise man is the fountain by

whose source the stream of this fountain flows out, and so spreads as if by a channel to water the hearts who listen to its doctrine by which they are refreshed, watered and cooled by true understanding. And by this gift is conquered the sixth vice which is gluttony. For nothing hinders understanding as does gluttony. This is what Jeremiah says. (?)

7. The seventh property of the elephant is that after many years, in old age, it has a little one which it loves with very great tenderness, by which we are instructed in the gift of wisdom. This little one is our Lord who comes to the soul after many trials. The soul has a little one when it desires but one thing, its whole heart yearns for one thing, when it can say these two words, "one thing I ask of the Lord," (Ps. 26:4) of which our Lord says, "one thing is necessary," where he excuses Mary to Martha, as if he were to say, "Martha, you are very preoccupied, but there is only one thing necessary." (Luke 10:41) And just as the elephant after many years has a little one, so the soul after much time and with great trial comes to the one unity which it desired, which is done by the gift of wisdom which removes the seventh sin of lust. For sovereign spiritual delight chases away sovereign carnal delight.

En trestout autresi comme li oliphans après mout d'ans a .i. faon, autresi l'ame après mout de tans et a grant travail vient a cele unité qu'ele desiroit, que li fait li dons de sapience ki oste le sietisme pechiét de luxure. Car souverains delis spirituels encace souverain delit carnal.

In conclusion, I offer a lesson from another sermon from this series on the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Explaining the text of Psalm 104:30, the preacher says three conditions are necessary for the Holy Spirit to come: he must be desired by the heart, he must be invited, and a place must be prepared for him. So now let us together renew our desire

for these gifts of the Holy Spirit, invite them now and often, and keep a place prepared for them in our lives.

“Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.”

Amen