

Message: Ready for the spiritual battle?**“Do you have a War Room?”**

The online movie review service Plugged In has this to say about the movie *War Room*: “War is as old as human history, an aged widow named Miss Clara narrates in the opening moments of *War Room*. ‘We fight for power. We fight for riches. We fight for rights. We fight for freedom,’ she says. ‘There always seems to be something to fight about.’ That’s as true for individuals as it is for countries. Yet despite the reality of relational conflict, Clara observes, ‘Very few of us know how to fight the right way.’ We fight each other instead of recognizing our common spiritual enemy, she says, the thief who comes ‘to steal, kill and destroy.’ If we hope to thwart Satan’s schemes, to counter his cunning strategies to divide us, we’ll need a beefy battle strategy. A strategy that can come from only one place: time spent asking for God’s guidance in our prayer closet. Or, as Miss Clara calls it, her ‘war room.’”¹

This is, for many of us, an encouraging review. It might spark your interest in going to see the movie or renting it.

How about this review from CinemaBlend? “...*War Room* is so unabashedly brazen with its Evangelical agenda, and shows such a blatant disregard for plot, character and cinema in general, only divine intervention will stop you from walking out. [...] As a film, *War Room* isn’t just a monumental failure. It actually should be hung, drawn and quartered for crimes against cinema. Not only are its characters painfully dull, but there is literally no plot or drive, other than the fact that Tony and Elizabeth’s marriage has slightly stagnated. It’s littered with turgid, unrealistic dialogue, and the direction is preposterously lifeless, with the Kendrick Brothers often just resorting to haphazard montage sequences to pass the time. Plus, it drags on for two hours! Two life-sapping hours.

Here’s the thing, though. *War Room* isn’t really a movie. Instead, it’s just a glossy, elongated infomercial for prayer. And, if you’re inclined to accept its agenda, it works. Because the audience I saw it with hooted, praised and squealed with joy at the right times. [...] It struck a chord.

¹ <http://www.pluggedin.com/movie-reviews/war-room>

And this success not only means that more films of its ilk could become more and more prominent in mainstream Hollywood, it also proves that audiences would rather see an empty room with prayers stuck on the wall than Zac Efron DJing.”²

That’s a very different kind of review. The comment about “life-sapping hours” is particularly pointed. It might turn off some who were interested in the movie, though it’s interesting the reviewer makes the comment “if you ... accept the Christian agenda, the movie works.”²

Well, what about Roger Ebert, after all he’s fair, isn’t he? The reviewer on Ebert’s web site concludes his review with the following: “If there is a link between “War Room” and last year’s evangelical hit, “God’s Not Dead,” it can be found in their shared hypocrisy. “God’s Not Dead” was a call for tolerance that defended the intolerance of anti-gay Christians. “War Room” preaches that we have no call to be righteous and judge others, yet the film itself is righteous and judgmental in the extreme. If these films truly want to evangelize, then they must step outside their comfort zone - out of the closet, so to speak. They must acknowledge that life is far more complicated than the typical Sunday sermon would indicate, and that faith means more than submitting to a controlled existence ruled by fear. They must portray the full dimensionality of the material world before they can begin to explore the spiritual one.”³

What do make of these three different reviews? They show three different perspectives of Christianity: one from the believer’s view, one from the unbeliever’s view and one from the point of view of a person who sounds like they want to hear a message, but they have been hurt by the church. I believe these are an accurate representation of our community, the neighborhoods surrounding our church and your homes. Do you agree?

I know what you’re thinking right now: pastor, we know all this. You aren’t telling us anything new. All you’re doing is making us uncomfortable about our faith and pointing out how difficult it is to live

² <http://www.cinemablend.com/reviews/War-Room-67177.html>

³ <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/war-room-2015>

as a Christian today. Guess what? You **SHOULD** be uncomfortable! Jesus’ message in Mark 9:38-50 speaks to this point exactly.

Just before this passage, Jesus caught the disciples bickering over their position in God’s kingdom. He set them straight with one of the greatest lessons on life: “*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all*” (v35). Jesus used a young child to illustrate the point: none of us are greater than anyone else. We all depend on Jesus’ love for everything, particularly the restoration of our relationship with God.

The conversation continues in today’s Scripture passage. Some scholars see this portion of text as a compilation of Jesus’ teachings over a period of time. Even if that’s so, the lessons are fit together well. Jesus is telling his disciples to wake up and get ready, they’re in a war. Whether we realize it or not, there is a spiritual battle continually being fought for the hearts, minds and souls of every person on Earth.

We don’t like the concept of war. You don’t and I don’t, either. But that doesn’t mean a spiritual battle isn’t going on. We’re on the front lines. Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world is our part in the battle, fought with love. That’s because love and forgiveness are the most powerful and effective ways to overcome cynicism, rejection, silence, isolation, apathy and the hurt they cause. It’s hard to remain distant from someone who prays for you and cares for you, even when you reject them. We hear stories of salvation all the time from prisons, refugee camps and places where someone cared and God changed a heart in spite of all the odds.

The disciples didn’t like the message, either. They weren’t ready to lead even after all the time Jesus spent with them. John jumped into the conversation, telling Jesus how they tried to stop someone who wasn’t a follower from casting out demons in Jesus’ name. John was taking an exclusive stance, saying, “Hey Jesus, we’re defending you and your message by keeping ‘those kinds’ of people out.”

What did Jesus say? “Don’t do that. Don’t interfere with people who are doing good in my name” (v39). There are two reasons: first, being a follower of Jesus isn’t exclusive, it’s inclusive. The person who does good in Jesus’ name, who is drawn to Jesus in any way, is already on the

path to a right relationship with God. The millstone image is a warning to us not to interfere with those whose faith is small or new. Second, there's too much work to be done to focus on the ways other people are serving God. There's a battle going on for the souls of people who are dying every day. That should be our priority, not arguing over the different theological opinions we have or the different ways we worship and praise God. We need to be 100% committed to following Jesus, not part-time, occasionally committed followers.

Doesn't the overwhelming response of our country to Pope Francis' visit give evidence to our desire to experience deeper spirituality?

We may disagree with the Catholic Church's policies and practices and the Pope's defense of them, but he is clearly a deeply spiritual man who practices what he believes. That's worthy of respect and our spirit reacts to his presence. We are allies with Pope Francis and our Christian brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic Church in the spiritual battle.

I need to say a few things about verses 42-50. First of all, the warnings are important but not literal. Do not cut off your hand, foot or pluck out your eye! Every year there are news accounts of some poor soul who literally cut off a hand or blinded themselves because of evil influences.

Eyes, hands and feet are symbols of important parts of our being, representing our ability to see and understand, to touch and care, to stand firm and go in service. Jesus' message isn't just about turning away from sin, though that's important. Jesus' message is about the fact that we may have to sacrifice things important to us as we engage in spiritual conflict. Maybe you're faced with a problem and you don't know the whole story or what our denomination says about a specific situation. We can't see whole truth, but we can show God's love in a non-judgmental and open way. Maybe we don't know what do to for a friend who is suffering and in need. We aren't sure how to reach out, but we can touch their life even if it's just through a card, a meal or sitting with someone in silence. Maybe we feel like the world is crazy and we're off-center and feeling marginalized because of our beliefs, but when we can't stand firmly on our own, we can rely on Jesus' love to help us speak words that affirm and build others up, even if we disagree.

The word “hell” in vv43, 45 and 47 is actually a Greek name, Gehenna. Gehenna was a valley near Jerusalem. It was the public dump, where people would bring refuse, including unwanted bodies. The refuse was burned, so fires burned constantly. This is a source of the classical image of hell. The traditional teaching is that it’s better to suffer loss, even of something valuable to us, in the spiritual battle of life, than to turn away from our calling because that path leads to hell.

A modern day reading of those same passages looks at fire as an image of conflict. “Unquenchable fire” is continual, non-stop conflict. The ongoing battle between ISIS and their enemies is one example of non-stop conflict. Sadly, there are homes in our neighborhoods and perhaps in our congregation where conflict is more normal than peace. Jesus tells us we are called to love others even when we can’t see the whole picture, when we don’t know how to reach out or when we aren’t feeling sure of our opinion. If we don’t follow Jesus’ teaching to show love and forgiveness regardless of the situation, we will be drawn into the conflict. We won’t have a ringside seat. We’ll become part of the problem. We’ll have lost the spiritual battle. We need to turn around and rely on Jesus’ love, sacrificing our time, ego and pride to try again.

Jesus gives us a final warning in v49 using the image of salt and fire. Fire and salt can act to destroy or to preserve. We all face conflict in our lives. Our response is either loving or unloving toward others – that’s our saltiness! If we show love, we are following in the footsteps of Christ. We add to their lives in a way they will remember and be drawn to. If we show judgment or a me-first attitude and behavior to others, we’re on our own path. Good things can happen, but others won’t have the same kind of relationship and attraction to God’s Spirit working within us. We will be salt that has lost it’s saltiness.

The world is hurting and looking for hope in all the wrong places. It’s a place of conflicting opinions and attitudes, where Christian faith is challenged if it doesn’t demonstrate love in real, authentic ways. Ready or not, we’re in the spiritual battle of our lives. Let’s open our hearts, minds and doors to others in Christ’s love, inspiring them with our passionate devotion so they might experience God’s life-giving love.

Mark 9:38-50 (NRSV)

John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”