

3rd Sunday after Pentecost June 21, 2020

Jeremiah 20:7-13, Romans 6:1b-1, Matthew 10:24-39

It can be hard speaking the truth to those whom you love. Hard, because sometimes you know that speaking them will cause division between you and that loved one. Between you and others whom you love. Hard, because not speaking that truth will endanger the one you love.

I've seen it. I've seen the children who know that mom or dad need to stop driving, or can't live on their own anymore and they dread having that conversation with their parent. Because they know what will happen, because their parent isn't ready to hear it yet. They'll get angry, push back- make the case for why they can still live that way, drive that car. They might even drop the atomic bomb of, "You don't love me enough to let me/help me do this."

I've seen the families that strive to intervene when one of their own goes off the rails through addictions and just bad life choices. Here too there is often pushback, sometime violent, always vehement, that what is being described to them is not reality or at least not that bad. That they, their own family, are out to get them.

This is the kind of divisiveness that Jesus talks about in our Gospel reading today. It is not division for divisions sake, or to gain some advantage, to separate the righteous from the sinners (as too often seems to happen in our politics now a days). Rather, Jesus is giving a warning, that when you follow him, you need to be prepared to receive the same kind of violent and vehement reactions that he did.

And this ought not surprise us, because this has been a hazard for all those who are claimed by God from the beginning.

Jeremiah complains to God about his call as prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah. He says God enticed him into this calling, this relationship and now look what's going on. He is mocked and laughed at all day long because of his prophesy- his truth telling- given to him by God, that if the people of Judah do not straighten up and fly right, if they do not give up their worship of false gods and turn again to the one, true God, if they don't care for the widows and orphans and aliens in their country, those who are the most vulnerable and least considered of their society, then there will be disastrous consequences. And for this truth telling -Jeremiah is shunned, ridiculed, denounced. This abuse is strong enough that Jeremiah vows to just keep his mouth shut. But he can't. For this calling from God is like a fire burning in him and he cannot hold it in. He must proclaim the truth, even though it is divisive, because only then is there a chance that Judah might repent, turn back from their ways, and be spared.

The life of a follower of Jesus is not easy. Jesus tells the apostles', "Hey, if they say that I'm the ruler of demons, what worse things are they going to say about you? If they crucify me, what do you think they are going to do with you?" So, he says, take up your cross and follow me. For only in this following, only by losing your life for my sake will you save it. For only in following Jesus, will we find life - true life- fuller and more abundant than what we have now. But this life of faith is not easy, is not all sweetness and light. There will be those who when they are confronted with the truth will respond with rejection and denial.

But to not speak is impossible. Not because we love division or seek to create it, but because we love our neighbors too much not to speak. Because we love our God too much not to speak. Because if we see a drowning man we throw them a line! If we see someone about to get hit by a car we at least shout a warning. Because only when we proclaim this truth will people have a chance to turn back and live the full and abundant life we do now.

What is this truth that is so hard for people to accept? Jesus says that God's love and mercy extended even to those who are considered sinners, suffering for their sins. He ate with them, he healed them, he treated them in the same manner that he treated the scribes and Pharisees. For we are all sinners, are we not? Jesus dared to suggest that God's love for people was more important than human rules. He suggested that in many ways it was the rich, important, even the religious who needed to repent and not those who were held in low esteem. And those rich, important, valued people weren't ready to hear this truth. Because life was pretty good for them. Because they were convinced they were right with God. And they pushed back, violently and vehemently until they had killed Jesus.

What are the hard truths that God speaks into our midst, my friends in Christ? The truths that we reflexively push against. That we reject out of hand. Mostly because, I think, they hit too close to home. Because to even think about accepting them as true would undermine a large part of our self-understanding. The narrative we have built about our lives and how they work. About the kind of people we are, "I'm okay. I'm right with God." But as Paul reminds us, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. This takes on a whole other meaning if we remember John's understanding that Jesus is the "truth".

One truth we need to hear, to accept, so that we may repent has arisen again in the last few weeks- is that as a country, we have treated those who were not white people of European decent as something less than human. Certainly, something less than us. You see those attitudes towards Native peoples as well as African Americans, those of Asian descent, those who are of Hispanic descent. I think we could all name some of the stereotypes that we still associate with those groups. Jews are shysters, Asians are all good at math and run restaurants or laundromats, Native Americans are all drunks, African Americans are dangerous, lazy, leeches on the system, Hispanics are uneducated servants who are taking our jobs, cheating the system. I'm sure we can think of others. But some are imbedded so deeply in our collective consciousness that we don't even see them. Or see the danger they are to us as well as our fellow human beings.

These attitudes are sinful, they harm our relationship with God, because they deny even basic human dignity to ones who bear the image of God. Because they condemn a people for the color of their skin or their place of birth- both of which they have no control over. We should repent of these attitudes- both in ourselves as individuals- but more importantly in the structures and policies that we enact as a people to govern ourselves.

And don't start with the, "but what about..." Not only is it a logical fallacy but what it does is seek to avoid responsibility. It is a means of escaping the conviction that is our only hope of salvation. To turn away from that which we should look at. And if nothing else, it is something I imagine that most of us wouldn't let our children get away with it. Say you wake up in the morning and find they didn't wash the dishes last night like they were supposed to. So you

remind them, “Hey, weren’t you supposed to do the dishes last night?” Instead of acknowledging it, apologizing, and jumping to clean up, they respond with, “But what about that time last week when you were supposed to take me to practice and you didn’t?” The response does nothing to address the issue at hand.

Proclaiming these hard truths in our environment right now is to risk something. To risk actual physical harm if you speak this aloud in public in some places. To risk the same kinds of derision and mockery that Jeremiah endured. To risk our livelihood and our reputations. But the warning of Jesus is clear, if we seek to save our lives (the comfortable lives we have built) we will lose them. But if we lose our lives for the sake of Jesus and the Good News- we will save them. I would even say we will find them.

As Lutherans, we often point to baptism as our anchor as the surety of God’s claim on our lives. We also understand, thanks to Martin Luther, that our baptism is not a once and done event but a new life that we can enter into- need to enter into- every day. Because we have no illusions that since God claimed our lives we are totally without sin, with no need to be transformed. We know we need to continue to learn the ways in which we sin against God and our fellow human beings. We know there is much we still need to turn back from.

But the gift given to us is these waters of baptism. Waters that Parker Boyer was washed in last week and has available to him as well. Waters that promise to drown the old sinner. The one who clings to those stereotypes of others, that clings to the righteousness we think we’ve earned. Waters that not only cleanses

our soul but opens our eyes. To see the way God sees. To love all human beings the way God loves.

It is only by dipping into these waters of baptism and dying to our old selves that we are truly able to live as who we are- children of God. For as Paul asks, “How can we who have died to sin in these waters go on living in it!? We can’t!

By dipping into these waters of baptism we receive not only forgiveness of sin but what Paul calls newness of life. A novel way of being! One rooted so fully in Jesus Christ that even if we tried to keep our mouths closed in the face of injustice our hearts would burn within us! One that is so much better than the old life filled with suspicion, hatred, prejudice, and self-righteousness.

The life we live as followers of Jesus is not an easy one. We will be on the receiving end of our share of derision and abuse. But we will continue to speak the truth given to us by God in Jesus Christ to those around us- not because we are better than they are- but because we know our own sin, our own need for continual repentance. We speak this word because we love them- we see a drowning man and have to throw them a line.

I pray that together God would give us ears to hear and eyes to see the ways in which we sin against our fellow human beings because of the color of their skin. I pray that God would renew our hearts and give us courage and power to change not only ourselves but the very way in which we structure our society. I pray that more of us might find the newness of life that comes from the waters of baptism. I pray that we would ever walk with Jesus- the one who died so that we might live.