

Dangerous Lives

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 12
The Rev. Dr. J. Stewart Hardy

June 22, 2008
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 20:7-13; Psalm 69:7-10, 16-18;
Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Before I do anything, let me begin with what I am not sure is a disclaimer or a warning, but should any of you be seeking high public office some time in the future, you might want to leave now.

“God Damn America.” Three words from a sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright five days after 9/11. The sermon was preached to the members of Wright’s congregation, but the nation in which it was preached was totally unaware of it, for it remained obscure until a team of ABC investigative journalists came across it when they reviewed Wright’s sermons because of his mentoring relationship with Barack Obama. When they read this particular sermon, and came across that shocking statement, they knew they had struck media gold.

Equally shocking is this morning’s gospel, if we actually take note of what it says. Commissioned to go into the world making disciples by baptizing and teaching what Jesus had taught them, the disciples were directed to live and to proclaim that message publicly and loudly – no matter the reaction or cost. For their efforts, they were told they could expect to be publicly maligned and brutally treated, as Jesus Himself was and would be. So Jesus tells them He has not come to bring peace, but a sword. In following him, His disciples were to be prepared to face rejection and separation from family and kin. Their task was to be conducted as if they were journeying to their crucifixion, ready to lose their lives for Jesus’ sake.

Surely this is just extreme rhetoric, that those who follow Jesus, who obey His commands, should face trials, suffering, betrayal, threats, yes, and even death? I think our first reaction to these words is to see them as spoken in a past far removed from us, in a situation nothing like our own. It is so far from life as we know it here that it can hardly be relevant for us, can it? I wouldn’t mind betting that if we were to be given the opportunity to rewrite the gospel, this might be one section we would consider leaving out. Or, should we master the discomfort of our initial reaction to the gospel reading and listen more carefully and attentively to what it has to say?

The first thing to notice is that we, you and I, are disciples. At least those of us here this morning who are baptized. We are also engaged in the process of learning what Jesus has said and we are consequently obliged to conduct our lives as His followers, or if you will, His disciples. Like it or not, when we were baptized, our lives were woven inextricably into His. And therein lies a great complication.

The gospel reading begins with Jesus telling those who follow Him to expect opposition because He Himself faced it, and we no greater than he is. In other words, we should expect no exemptions. We will be called names. We will be misrepresented. We will be written off as irrelevant, and sometimes seen to be downright dangerous and threatening to the status quo. But fear of such reactions should not stop us or paralyze us from living out our faith in our everyday lives.

Did you notice that Jesus addresses such fear three times in the lesson? “Have no fear,” Jesus says, because what looks like meager beginnings of this message of the kingdom will have grand consequences. What has been quietly spoken like a secret will be shouted from the housetops. That proclamation is a reality which has already been launched with such power that there is no turning back, no matter what you or I think or do about it.

“Do not fear,” Jesus says, those whose power is limited simply to the body. They can wreak their havoc, but they cannot ultimately destroy. Instead, be in awe of God, who finally controls the destiny of body and soul; then we should “Fear God, but fear no earthly authority.”

“Be not afraid,” He says again, because as heavenly Father, God knows and cares about every individual disciple. If the sparrows get the divine attention, if every hair on one follower’s head is accounted for, how much more will His daughters and sons – you and I, beloved – be valued?

Somewhere I read the story of a Chinese pastor who had spent 18 years in prison in China because of His faith. He might have given up on His faith in order to survive, but instead he set to work to be as faithful a follower of Christ as he could in the labor camp to which he was assigned. To break him, the labor camp authorities assigned him to manage the camp’s vast cesspool. When the time came to empty it, the pastor was required to dig out the contents using a large shovel. But the pit was so deep that in order to finish the task, he had to wade through the waste. He was isolated from guards and prisoners simply because of his smell. But he came to enjoy his task because he was free of surveillance by the guards in a camp where no one had the luxury – ever – of being alone. He used his solitude to recite the Psalms, to pray, to meditate, and to sing hymns he could remember as loudly and as long as he wanted while he labored in the cesspool.

Some years ago I copied down his words about this experience. He wrote, “When I worked in the cesspool, I knew and discovered a wonderful fellowship with our Lord. Again and again I sang this hymn and experienced the Lord’s presence with me.

I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses;
And the voice I hear falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.
And He walks with me,
And He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own
And the joy I share as I tarry there
None other has ever known.”

And, I might add, he tended that cesspool with care and devotion to the lasting benefit of everyone in that camp, guards and prisoners alike. But the people around him and the nation which imprisoned him, paid absolutely no attention to him, to his labors, or to their results.

Like the Reverend Jeremiah Wright he was, for all intents and purposes, up to his ears in the wrong stuff. You see, the pity of it is, that only three words proclaimed by Jeremiah Wright were heard. And the price for that hearing was costly indeed. A long and deep personal relationship between a pastor and a parishioner was severed and denounced publically. A congregation and a denomination was shamed and humiliated in the public eye. And two presidential candidates found themselves denouncing pastors simply because of an association they had with them.

And you and I? You and I were left deeply shocked to the core by the stuff the media fed us. The words, just three, and how we heard them, drowned out the message which contained them. Now my purpose is not to defend Jeremiah Wright, nor is it to ridicule him. But it is to ask us to listen carefully to what our brethren say when they speak out of faith and conviction. Not that we agree with them, but that we might be given some cause for deep reflection on the positions we ourselves so easily and lightly hold. So I used the Reverend Jeremiah Wright to point out the very real dangers faced by people of commitment and faith when they proclaim their conviction. Notice how our gospel ends. Jesus announces that He has not come to bring peace to the world, but a sword. When taken with the seriousness Jesus demands our witness and our discipleship will at one time or another be in conflict with the views of the community and the culture in which we live. So far so good. However, when Jesus goes on in the text to say “. . . I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me . . .” When we hear those words, we are left shocked and speechless because of their extreme and inflammatory nature to our ears.

Surely Jesus cannot mean what He says. Unless . . . Unless behind these inflammatory remarks He is saying something we haven't quite caught. You see, Jesus brings with him a new order which is so radical in its message of love and freedom, that it challenges the structures and arrangements of the old order. The result is conflict. It is not simply that the old is threatened and resistive to the new, the new challenges the old and in doing so, precipitates strife. So the sacred institution of the family is singled out by the gospel writer as the place where the conflict rages most severely, for it is an area where loyalties run deep. And here the gospel writer applies

the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Jesus’ message, then, does not provide an unequivocal reinforcement of family cohesiveness. It does not suggest that the sticking together of families necessarily reflects faithfulness, or that by family solidarity society’s ills will be remedied. Instead, Jesus calls into question the idolatry of the family and warns that the gospel may divide rather than unite the home. The losing of life for the sake of Christ, and the vulnerability to martyrdom is, according to the gospel, how life is to be experienced and truly discovered.

And finally, the call to love Christ more than one’s family is an indirect way, if you think about it, of complementing and bringing honor to the family. Jesus gave His call for loyalty over against the strongest, not the weakest, claim a person otherwise knew, the claim of family love. Jesus never offered Himself as an alternative to the worst but as an alternative to the best that society had to offer. Jesus instructs the disciples as to how they should relate to their master, reassures them by distinguishing between their seeming adversaries and their true Adversary (with a capital A), clarifies the nature of true and false confession, and honestly confronts them with the critical choices every disciple – you and I, beloved – has to make. Those choices as to how you and I will live out our baptism and what you and I will do with our lives in imitation of Christ Jesus, are decisions that are wholly our own. Let us not cringe from making them. Or from living out of them. No matter what the consequences may appear to be.

From this point on may our lives be a living proclamation of our relationship with Christ and our faith in God, no matter how great the danger. Thus, through the courage and commitment of our following, of our discipleship, may God bless America.

Amen.