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Spreading the Gospel Isn't for Sissies
July 4, 2021 Pentecost 6B

I'm sure you noticed the common elements in the Scriptures we just heard read - that those whom God calls to speak God's word often don't get a great reception - in fact, they are often given a rough time. EVEN JESUS, in the text we just heard - "that's just Mary's boy, we've watched him grow up with his brothers and sisters....who does he think he is?" EVEN THE DISCIPLES, in that same passage - "if they refuse to listen, shake the dust off your feet and leave." EVEN THE PROPHETS, EZEKIEL in this instance - "*And you, O mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words, and do not be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. ⁷You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house.*"

We're not promised that things will be all easy-peasy for us when we speak God's words and tell of Christ Jesus. I mean, even the prophets whose works made the Bible, even the disciples, and even Jesus....ran into rebellious, ignorant, unbelieving, arrogant people who disregarded them, imprisoned them, stoned them (Stephen), put them down wells (Jeremiah), threatened their life (Samuel and the great prophet Elijah), and actually killed Jesus!

Yet we who believe the words and teachings of Christ, are called to continue his works and teach his words!!! Jesus calls us and asks us to spread this good news, knowing that we're not guaranteed a good hearing. It is not work that will necessarily gain us laud and honor among our peers. We're not greater than Jesus, and look what happened to him....

Yes, some people do get well-known for their preaching and their spirituality of life, but that's never the whole story of their experience - they also have known really rough times and mistreatment. They've been made fun of, mocked, turned down, told no way. And not just by folks who are outside the church, either; folks within churches, colleagues, supposed friends - they don't always treat each other well. It's been interesting to me the stories I've heard from other pastors in the FB groups I'm in. I know that I've had a couple pretty rough experiences in my years in parish ministry. I didn't realize it happens to just about every pastor at some time. After all, we deal with humans, and God is certainly not finished with any of us - people in churches can have personality issues, anger issues, be prone to bullying, be alcoholics - just like

anyone else. I'd like to assume that everyone on the road with following Christ is working on their own faults and problems, seeking to heal wounds of their past - I'd like to assume the Holy Spirit has been able to bring folks' attention to the places where they still don't live up to the words of God. But people are complicated, and issues are often deep, and we are often blind to our own hurtful behaviors. Facing the truths about ourselves is not easy work, and changing is a long process, healing is a slow process. It's a rare pastor that doesn't have at least one horror story in their years of ministry. If it happens early in their ministry, some have left their calls over it. If it happens after other more positive experiences, perhaps they know to find a wise mentor to talk things over with, go to a counselor, and begin to learn more about people - including themselves.

Because people are people are people, whether in or out of the church. And we have our own ideas, we've taken in our own ways of thinking, we don't like anything that seems to criticize us. The word "sin" is not a well-liked word or a well-liked concept. While the word gospel means "good news", and it is indeed good news that God loves us, seeks us, desires to restore our to relationship with God and heal our wounds - the fact of the matter is that we have to be willing to hear that are wounded, hear that we are NOT in a good relationship with God naturally, that we are on a path of death if it's not God's path of life, and that yes, we do sin. We miss the mark of the ways God tells us are the right ways for us. A writer I've enjoyed, Frederick Buechner - whose quotes I've used in our "thoughts before worship" - wrote that the gospel is bad news before its good news. That is, first we must realize we're in need of God's forgiveness, and need the restoration that Christ brings - first we have to admit our brokenness, our need; first we have to see that we've come to the end of what we can do and be without God - and then then we hear God's love and care as good news.

Jesus said, and I think he said it very tongue in cheek, that well folks have no need of the Good Physician. It's tongue in cheek because Jesus knew that people only THOUGHT they were well and not in need of God; it was the sick folks who KNEW they needed the Good Physician. In the same way, people who see no problem in how they're living or treating people see no need for counseling - even if they are hurting family members with their temper or their substance abuse, even if they're treating others with disrespect and judgmentalism - until they see there's a problem, they won't seek or want help. No one is so blind as the one who will not see. And we are all uniquely blind to our own issues... until we come up against it and admit it.

One has to want things to be better, one has to admit the problem, before one can open the mind to hear another point of view.

I've been struck these last couple Sundays by the questions in the baptism liturgy: when I have to ask them of these young parents, I hear the deep truths they name and quake on the inside at what we ask....listen to them again:

- Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

- Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?

- Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?

It's that one about turning from the ways of sin and renouncing evil and its power in the world that gets me quaking inside. Evil IS a power in the world, and when we speak the invitation of Christ, we are asking people to go against a strong power as they then turn to Christ. I don't always think of the gospel in this kind of a cosmic sense - I think about accepting the love of God, the blessing of God; I think of God wooing us like a lover might woo us. I think of stepping into God's kingdom, God's realm, as stepping into eternal life, stepping into the ways that we are made for, the ways that give us that abundant life that Jesus talks about.

I don't always remember that in going with the ways Christ teaches, that I am renouncing evil and its power in the world. In fact, I rarely use the word "evil" - I tend to think it makes me sound like someone in a movie about exorcisms or something. I'll think more that some things are bad for people and the planet, and others are more life-giving for people and the planet. When the apostle Paul talks about how we fight against powers and principalities, I want to think he's talking from a 1st century view of the world.

Yet I think we've seen some of those powers and principalities in action as we've seen people carried away by a mob mentality who do things they probably never thought they'd do. Some of the photographs of the neo-Nazi types from the brouhaha in Charlottesville, VA last year, where the anger and hate on faces almost make them inhuman. Some of pictures of folks who stormed our capital last January show the same intolerance and hatred, a turning to violence to try and get their way. The greed pictured in movies like Michael Douglas' portrayal of Gordon Gecko in Wall Street are deeply disturbing. The tales of lynchings and atrocities against Native Americans, black Americans, and Asian Americans in our country's history seem like more than

just a mild dislike. All over the world these kinds of thoughts of a killing hatred of other ethnicities seem to grab certain minds and lead them to genocides and other extremists acts. People seem to get almost brainwashed into a mob mentality and go further and do worse things than any would probably do alone.

There is evil, and we who choose to follow Christ are renouncing it, and turning to the ways of God's love and peace, kindness, joy, mercy, justice, care for others, and all those fruits of the Spirit that mark as a called-out people. We forget that there is a lot going on when we turn to Christ. Those powers and principalities don't want to be thwarted. Of course there is going to be resistance to God's message, and we shouldn't forget it. From those who just don't want to think about things, to those who are just going along with what their friends do, to those who are caught up in addictions that are killing them, to those who are actually seeking to do acts of hatefulness and terror - they won't be glad to hear God's invitation.

Yet it is our call to continue the work of Christ, continue to be God's Ambassador as Paul put it once, continue to offer the love of all people that God has, and to continue to heed the desire that people be made whole. We have the Spirit of God living in us, we who are following Christ - helping us speak bravely and wisely, love generously, give so that all have enough, and helping us to offer our lives to further Christ's work. That Spirit is opening our eyes to suffering, to hardship to discrimination, to injustice, to all that ails those who God loves, those for whom Christ came. And that is part of why we have BEEN called - that is our Great Work, our purpose.

May God give us vision for the ongoing mission so needed in the world. AMEN.