

Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 25, 2017
The Rev. Denise Trogdon

Risky Religion

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” This is one of those weeks when I wish I had assigned preaching to someone else! Our readings today are not easy to hear or understand, especially if you experience religion as a source of comfort. The words this morning are disturbing and dangerous. Wasn’t it just a few months ago that we were awaiting the arrival of the Prince of Peace, the gentle shepherd who taught us to turn the other cheek, our healer and reconciler?

What are we to do with this costly notion of discipleship, one that brings division and conflict? Jesus said, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, will find it.” Consider for a moment what we sacrifice for our faith. To be a Christ follower is much more than just the promise of comfort in times of trouble, we are also to be the trouble in times of comfort.

Back in Jesus’ day, “The Way” as his followers were first called, was a countercultural movement within Judaism and beyond. For the first several centuries Christianity labored in a hostile environment, placing its followers at great peril, facing persecution and even death. Their belief that God was calling every person, male and female, slave and free, of every nation, created a culture where women and slaves and the outcast had worth with gifts to share, and agency to make their own decisions. The followers of “The Way” empowered a radical new community that threatened the order of the Empire.

It is difficult for us to relate to this risky religion as we are the recipients of traditions that have become the status quo. Living in a nation with religious freedom, to call yourself Christian identifies you with the majority. So a subversive gospel is bound to make us uncomfortable. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, the gospel is not a flashlight but a fire. It can warm and it can burn. The gospel is not a table knife, but a sword. It can set free and it can divide. It is powerful stuff, enough to challenge the most sacred human ties. But, as frightening as it is, it is not to be feared.”

I believe that living our faith in the majority has cost our hearts dearly. It has weakened our passion for Christ’s teachings and our impulse for mission. Being a good Christian has been reduced to being a good citizen, being nice to our neighbors, saying our prayers at night. Modern ideas of the prosperity gospel claim that faith leads to well-being and even wealth. Faith as only a personal relationship has eclipsed Christ’s priority of justice and service to those on the margins. It is little wonder we are uncomfortable with risk and suffering as part of our calling.

For what would we put our lives on the line, put God before our families, choose to go against the norm? Peace is not the absence of conflict or maintenance of the status quo. The peace Jesus refers to, shalom, is that which makes everything whole. It is the realignment of our priorities, relationships and practices with the values of God’s kingdom. The peace of Christ begins with

the cross. It is the sword that divides as we choose whether or not we give it all. This is what it means to lose our life for Christ's sake.

Corrie ten Boom or Cornelius as she was named at birth, was a Dutch watchmaker and Christian who risked her life and freedom to help Jews escape from the Nazi regime during World War II. In May of 1942, a well-dressed woman came to the ten Booms' home with a suitcase in hand and told them she was a Jew, her husband had been arrested several months before, her son had gone into hiding, and Occupation authorities had recently visited her, so she was afraid to go back. Casper ten Boom, Corrie's father, readily agreed that she could stay with them, despite the police headquarters being only half a block away. The family became very active in the Dutch Underground hiding refugees. Corrie and her sister Betsie opened their homes to hide Jews. The Resistance sent an architect to Corrie's home to build a secret room for the Jews in hiding, as well as an alert buzzer to warn the refugees to get into the room as quickly as possible.

The entire Ten Boom family was arrested in 1944 and divided up in prison camps. Corrie's sister died in the camps and after several months of solitary confinement Corrie was moved to one of the most brutal prisons. Two years later Corrie was released because of a clerical error. The rest of her family went to the gas chamber. Corrie wrote in her book, *The Hiding Place*, that her faith brought her through suffering and persecution. But she also knew that Christ called and empowered her to stand up for what was right, against the empire of her day. Corrie went on to open rehabilitation houses for war refugees and then to be a writer and speaker for her faith. Her religion was a living example of our gospel passage. While her faith provided comfort it was also the catalyst for her suffering. Jesus said to his followers "Have no fear of them for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Even the hairs of your head are all counted, so do not be afraid."

To live as a disciple is to be committed not only to Christ but to the mission he gave his followers. This is to be the love of Christ in all situations of life and to work for justice and dignity for all human beings. I invite you to reflect upon how your beliefs and practices in the world reflect this. Has living the gospel put you at odds with your peers, your family and community? In our times I believe there is no greater temptation than to be complacent.

We must live Christ's imperative to be the trouble when there is comfort with an unjust society or oppression of our neighbors. We can do this because God is with us and for us and has counted every hair on our heads. But make no mistake, it is not without costs. It is our heart's cry if we listen, to be a part of something that has meaning, something beyond ourselves. To work with others to bring about true peace, the shalom of God which makes all things whole, is to lose our life as we know it, for Christ's sake. If our sword is the cross, we bear it by example and meet the world's cries with love, Amen.