

*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
Ensure justice for those being crushed,
Speak out, defend the rights of the poor and the helpless.*

Proverbs 31: 8-9

A long time ago...

Jesus went back to his hometown of Nazareth and stood in the synagogue

- to lay out his mission, his life's work:
- that the Good News of God's favor for all people
- was fulfilled in him.

We, who sit in these pews this Sunday, hear this as "Gospel"... as "Good News" indeed!

But Jesus' audience?

They had an opposite reaction.

As Jesus looked them in the eye and boldly proclaimed that

God's release...God's recovery...God's freedom and favor are for the least and the last among us....as well as for the privileged...

the people in the pews, after all of ten minutes, were -

Angered

Offended

Outraged!

So much so, that they chased Jesus out of town, ready to kill him.

Who was this "neighborhood preacher" with the audacity to speak such nonsense in a place of worship?

How dare he?

A few days ago...

An Episcopal Bishop stood in the sanctuary of her church

to lay out the mission, the life work of Christ, and the work of those who follow him:

- Honor the dignity of every human being
- Speak the truth to one another in love
- Be merciful, as Christ has been merciful to us.

Some who listened, heard these words as “Gospel”. But others seated in the pews of that sanctuary had an opposite reaction.

When the Bishop looked them in the eye and said gently, but fearlessly, that God’s favor and mercy comes freely for all, as should ours...

Some people in the pews were -

Angered

Offended

Outraged! That a Bishop would express one of the core teachings of Jesus.

In the name of God, I ask you to have mercy...

So offended were they, that the sneers on their faces and mocking disdain in their eyes was visible to all.

So outraged were they, that within seven minutes... hate-filled venom was spewed at the Bishop –

Calling her a “witch”

a “crazy woman”

a “God-hater, demonically possessed”

- inundating her with death threats...and deportation.

(By the way, she’s from New Jersey).

Who was this “so-called” neighborhood preacher with the audacity to speak such nonsense in a place of worship?

How dare she?

Notice, that when Jesus read the scripture passage which so offended those gathered in the synagogue, he didn’t unroll the sacred scroll haphazardly. Jesus opened the scroll to Isaiah, to a particular chapter and verse –

Knowing that the people he was sent to love, serve and save needed a word of promise,
not despair,

Needed a word of hope, to keep their faith alive.

Needed assurance, of who God was for them.

And according to Jesus, God is “Good News.” For whom?

For the oppressed.

God is liberty. For whom? The captive.

God is a “binder of wounds” for the brokenhearted.

Release – for those in prison.

Comfort – for those bereaved.

God is sight for the blind and a listening ear for all who pray.

A protector of the powerless.

A relentless Advocate for the persecuted and the afflicted.

Good News! The best news!

God’s favor falls on the favorable but also on the...

Unacceptable...the broken...and on those in need of fixing.

This – is who God is for.

How dare Jesus say it.

It should, perhaps, come as no surprise that the Bishop’s words last Tuesday followed a flood of governmental decisions and Executive Orders -

- Vilifying immigrants
- Seeking retribution against political opponents
- Removing protections for the poor/the needy/the LGTBQ community/minorities. children/women/cancer patients. Let me say that again: cancer patients.

Equally, it should perhaps come as no surprise, that the reaction of some seated in the cathedral pews was one of outrage.

Those vested with an abundance of power often find Jesus’ Gospel of mercy hard to hear.

No wonder... that in a country which increasingly worships power/wealth/ and a sense of entitlement...that people would take offense at the notion that we are accepted and loved because of God's mercy and grace in Jesus -

Rather than a lifetime trying to make ourselves look good.

After all, it is a humbling thing to need a God

- who is so mighty to save
- so mighty to provide
- so mighty to forgive.

No wonder the Gospel is offensive!

It reveals just how weak and needy and broken we are without Christ and his mercy.

In the name of God, I ask you to have mercy...

How dare a Bishop suggest in a Service of Prayer that the leader of our nation show some mercy and compassion for the most vulnerable among us? A core theological conviction of Old and New Testament faith for centuries.

How dare she?

Clearly, whether they admit it or not – it was Jesus – not the Bishop – who offended those outraged listeners at the cathedral. Jesus, who is filled... with mercy.

Today...

It's January and it's cold and as we sit in these pews the world is full of heartbreak and hate.

Every news cycle brings a new outrage of how hurting people are facing threats of more hurt –

Through the actions of our nation, our society, our government - and even by the Church.

And it seems as if there is no savior, no leader, with the courage and spirit to say "Enough!"

This is not the will of God.

This is not the will of Christ.

This is not the way of Jesus.

The word “Christian” means “Christ-like.” And if it doesn’t look like Jesus...if it doesn’t sound like Jesus...then there’s nothing Christ-like about it.

- If it’s not Good News to the poor.
- If it’s not release to the captive.
- If it’s not justice for those who are oppressed.
- If it’s not about welcoming the stranger, the refugee, the migrant.
- If there is no mercy...

There is nothing Christ-like about it.

What we are living with today are competing narratives of what the Christian faith is fundamentally about. Writer Shane Claiburne states:

This cult of Christian Nationalism and its followers in the Church, society and government have turned the seven deadly sins into a way of life. They have made a mockery of the fruits of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.). They have abandoned Jesus’ teachings of the Sermon on the Mount.

This is a disease that hardens our hearts against others, scoffs at God’s mercy for others, abandons God’s love in Jesus for the love of godlike power over others.

Hate and anger are all it offers.

This competing version of Christianity tries to camouflage itself. The problem is – it doesn’t look or sound like the Jesus of the Gospels.

The Jesus who blesses the poor, the peacemakers, the meek and the merciful.

The Jesus who insists love is the way.

This is the Gospel of Jesus!

This is the Gospel the Bishop so powerfully preached last week!

This is the Gospel which looks so very different from that which is poisoning the Church, our society, our government and world.

To be clear...

- How people in this world are treated matters to God...and should matter to those who claim to follow Jesus. A person’s value and worth is not dictated by an Executive Order.
- Never apologize when asking for mercy for others.

- None of the ugliness that has happened this week is “normal”.
- None of the hate, the outrage, the retributions, the sneers and disdain are “Christlike”.
- None of it is “Good News.”

And yet... the Spirit of the Lord that was upon Jesus in that synagogue is upon us today.

Sending us out to witness to the great Good News of God’s favor for all people.

Urging us to be daring and bold and brave as we “live into” the truth of Jesus’ mission and ministry:

- To speak up for those who cannot speak
- To defend the rights of the poor and the powerless
- Do justice
- Love kindness
- Walk humbly with God.

And - in the name of Jesus –

To be merciful. Amen.