

January 30, 2016 - Epiphany 4C

“One Step Closer to the Edge” - Rev Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13; Luke 4:21-30

Hebrews 12 says, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”* (Hebrews 12:1-2) The Greek word for ‘witnesses’ is “martyrwn”, which is the root word for our word ‘martyr’. The translation is correct, because a martyr is indeed a witness to Jesus Christ.

Jesus is almost ‘martyred’ here today. He is chased to the edge of a cliff and, at the last moment, he passes through the crowd, almost as if he becomes a fog or a breeze, and escapes. Martyrs, those who have died as witnesses to the faith, are almost always killed for what they say they believe. What makes one a martyr in the eyes of the history of the church is if, upon your dying breath, you proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord.

As those who believe in God and in Jesus Christ as the earthly expression of God’s love and salvation, what we say matters. What the ‘cloud of witnesses’ said matters. What they said and did matters so much, the author of Hebrews suggests they surround us and bear witness to our proclamation and action in the name of Christ. That is a powerful idea and it is intended to give us strength in times of need and trouble. We can look back over the centuries and see witnesses to the faith who faced similar things, and in remembering them, we can trust once again in what they trusted upon - God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Jeremiah’s call shows us the importance of the words and thoughts the Lord has given us. God says to Jeremiah, *“Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord.” Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.”* (Jeremiah 1:8-9)

This is powerful and a little frightening. It should be. Jeremiah has been called upon to speak God’s word to the people. The Lord tells Jeremiah to not be afraid, because Jeremiah knows what happens when God’s word is spoken to the people often. They don’t like it. They don’t respond well.

Jesus reminds the disciples of a similar thing. Once we are chosen by God, sometimes God chooses to speak through us, especially in times of persecution and trouble. Jesus says to the disciples in John 15: *“But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.”* (John 15:26-27)

And again in Matthew: *“...and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”* (Matthew 10:18-20)

You and I do not know when we may be called to bear witness before governors and kings may happen, but the history of the faith suggests it could be at any given time for us. For Jesus today, it just doesn't matter to those who hear. They don't like what God has to say to them. As we said last week, the hometown synagogue at which Jesus opens his ministry is not open to the idea of sick people, poor people, ex-cons, people who have suffered under oppression being among them. At first they are excited. They think Jesus will be their earthly military hero who will free them from the Roman Empire. But then Jesus flips the table on them. Jesus does what he always does; he makes it about them. And they just can't take it.

*"Isn't this Joe's kid?", "Wasn't Mary his mom? Things weren't quite right with how all that came about with him", "Wasn't he the carpenter around here for a while?...I think he fixed my roof once".* The people start looking for excuses to reject Jesus. And they find them.

I was thinking about what it might be like for me to return to Eau Claire and be a preacher in my hometown. Assuming people remember me there, there are some I can imagine who would have a hard time hearing the message on Sunday morning because of what they knew about me. *"Isn't that the doctor's boy? Why didn't he follow in his dad's footsteps?", "Seth Jones...Didn't he break into the ventilation system underneath the college, not once or twice, but several times?", "Oh...I had to move you up to the front row in Trigonometry because you wouldn't quit asking questions", "Weren't you an atheist for a while?"*

Crowds are finicky, especially a hometown crowd. *"No prophet is acceptable in his hometown"*, Jesus says today. When Jesus tells them there are people outside their tribe who are to be welcomed into the synagogue in the name of God, it is too much for them. The crowd rises up and take him right up to the edge of the cliff in order to throw him over. Truth, especially God-oriented, Spirit-driven truth, often pushes people to the edge of the cliff.

Can you imagine, for a moment, what that truth that needs to be spoken to someone else or a group of people might be? Is there a truth they need to hear, that, upon hearing might push them to the edge of the cliff?

Now, switch the question around: What is the truth which, if it was spoken to you, if a relative or friend said it to you, would make you want to push them to the edge of the cliff? Think about it for a while, because both are there - the truth you need to speak, and the truth you need to hear.

Speaking truth in the name of God does not, like our present political climate suggests, mean saying whatever you believe to be true. It does not mean saying whatever might be honest about the person or the situation. I don't really know if there are constraints to truth, but I do know that the words of Christ and God and the Holy Spirit are governed by one primary thing. Psalm 36 puts it this way: *"Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; your judgments are like the great deep; man and beast you save, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God!"* (Psalm 36:5-7)

Let me tell you a story about a man who pushed others to the edge and was himself pushed to the edge of the cliff of God's mercy and love. Callistus died in 222 CE. He was born into slavery in Rome. When he was an adult, Callistus was put in charge of a fund that his owner

created for Christian widows. With Callistus' oversight, the fund lost all its money. Callistus was accused of embezzlement, and the accusation probably was not wrong. He went on the run, but his owner chased him across the Mediterranean. When his owner caught up with him, legend has it that Callistus dived out of the boat he was on and tried to swim away. He was caught and returned to his owner.

Callistus was charged by his owner with the task of recovering the money. On a Sabbath, Callistus stood outside a synagogue and tried to get money from the Jewish men entering. Callistus accused some of them of losing the money he had been charged to oversee. Callistus was thus arrested for extortion and also for being a Christian. His owner argued that Callistus was not a Christian based on his actions. Callistus was sent to the mines of Sardinia, which was essentially a death sentence by hard labor.

The Roman emperor at this time was Emperor Commodus. One of Commodus' mistresses was a Christian woman named Marcia. Marcia heard that there were Christians imprisoned at Sardinia and she pleaded for their release. Commodus appealed to the Pope at the time, Victor 1. Victor scrubbed the list and made sure Callistus was not on the list, but when the servant arrived, Callistus got down on his knees and pled mercy. Mercy was granted and Callistus was freed, to the horror of all parties.

Pope Victor, in an attempt to keep Callistus out of trouble, set him up with a pension and an apartment to recover from his trials at the mines. During this time, Callistus studied Scripture and prayed and suffered the transformation of the heart that Jesus seeks for all of us. The next Pope, Zephyrinus, was so impressed with Callistus, he made him a deacon and put him in charge of the Christian cemeteries in Rome. Over the next few years, Callistus developed a reputation of mercy and forgiveness to all who spoke with him. He radiated gentleness and love. So influential was Callistus in his position as overseer of the cemeteries that, upon Zephyrinus' death, he was elected Pope.

Here is where our Gospel story comes into play. When God's actions and God's words of mercy and love are honored and expressed, people do not always respond in kind. Hippolytus was one of the great theologians of the early church. He was strict and wrote long tracts about how priests and believers alike should behave and act. Hippolytus believed that a single mortal sin was enough to eject a person from the fellowship of believers for life. Our churches would be empty, of course, and the faith would have died a quiet, silent death on the fringes of history and thought if we followed through on Hippolytus' ideas. But he was very popular in Rome at this time.

Imagine, then, how horrified Hippolytus, leader, thinker and popular ideologue of the beginning church of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, was when Callistus - former embezzler and extortioner and prisoner - was elected Pope. Imagine how much more horrified he was when Callistus campaigned to welcome back those who had fallen away from the faith, those who had been charged and convicted of adultery and fornication, prisoners, the recently divorced, all those who had done what Callistus had done.

Hippolytus was pushed to the edge by it all, and he wrote hit pieces about Callistus. When no one listened to him, Hippolytus took matters into his own hands and had his little group of

followers elect him Pope. It was a mess for the church, having two Popes at the same time, but through it all Callistus sought to express love and mercy in every way possible, remembering always the love and mercy he had been shown.

In 222, a riot against the Christians started in Rome. Callistus was forced out onto the streets and chased down, then killed by a mob of angry people.

At the edge of the cliff, will we react like Hippolytus and seek to push the one who expresses love and mercy over the edge; or will we be like Callistus and express love and mercy to all so they might one day be reconciled to the Lord?

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, suggests, strongly and rightly, that the most excellent way into all relationships, all situations and all understandings is love. *“If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”* Everything starts in love - *“God loved us before we loved God”*; and everything ends in love - *“For God so loved the world, he gave his Only Son, so that all who believe in him might have eternal life.”* Love and mercy are the heart of the faith.

Don't get me wrong, though. Even though love is patient and kind, speaking love and mercy, speaking God's truth, into a situation will not always solve things. Even though love does not insist on its own way and is not irritable or resentful, it can make things much, much worse. Let us grant the authority of tradition to the great cloud of witnesses and presume them to have died because they spoke of God's love and mercy, and showed God's love and mercy. The great witnesses, the martyrs of the church, bore all things, believed all things, hoped all things and endured all things in the love of God, and because of them, because of the cliffs they were thrown over, we know God's love and mercy undermines empires. We know God's love and mercy erodes oppressive systems. We know God's love and mercy can inspire great reactions of violence against those who seek peace and understanding. We know God's love and mercy destroys personal agendas and the desires of those who seek power, for God's love and mercy give us a glimpse of the fullness of knowing available to us in God and Christ. This is what the martyrs died for - speaking and expressing God's love and mercy.

Love and mercy are the ultimate rebellion against the agents of death and evil in the world. We have faith and hope in these things, knowing God's love and mercy brings us one step closer to the edge with Jesus.