

02/03/13 4th Sunday of Epiphany Communion

“Words and Actions: Jesus Passing Through”

Rev. Seth D. Jones

I am sure many of you have been faced with a situation where it would have been best for you to not speak; a situation where you would be better off if you just kept your mouth shut. Some of us run into this situation more than others. Once, when I was in the 8th grade at Central Junior High School, I was in Industrial Arts class. At my work table sat Bill L. All of Bill’s friends - Al, Kip, Charlie - were in that class as well. Bill and his friends were part of the ‘burn-out’ crowd. Bill was one of the leaders and was held up because he had flunked 9th grade. If I ever wanted to get drugs of any kind, Bill would have been the go-to guy.

But I didn’t want drugs. One day in class, Bill asked me if I wanted to drop acid. The other thing I should tell you about Bill and his gang is their habit of chasing me down the halls, stealing whatever money I had and beating me up in the locker room. So Bill asking me any question at all was something that raised all my red flags. We are faced with these moments sometimes, where the best course of action is to shake your head, say “No” and go back to what you are doing. Bill laughed and looked at his friends. Instead of doing what would be the best course of action, I took a deep breath. I felt called in some way to speak some truth to these psychos who had made my life miserable. It seemed like the *right thing to do*.

So I said, “Bill, I think drugs are for people who cannot handle reality.” Within seconds, Bill had his hands on my shirt and was lifting me out of my chair. “What did you say”, he said. I looked over to the teacher, who looked at me, looked at Bill and looked at Bill’s friends who gathered behind Bill and walked out of the classroom. I looked back at Bill and realized there was no way out. There was no passing through the crowd for me, so I looked Bill in the eyes and said the same thing again.

Was it worth it? Not really. I had the marks to show for it, though. Just one more badge in my personal book of pride for speaking truth to bullies. No one cared, except for me.

I tell this story because the trajectory is similar to our readings. Think about difficult situations that you have cared about in the past. I just witnessed this very same trajectory the other night at a community meeting. Someone came to the meeting, started talking and worked himself up into a point where he felt like he was speaking truth into a situation. It went badly. The person who did it the other night was universally reviled by the group - he sealed his rejection permanently by his poor attitude, behavior and treatment of others in the group. He left, I am sure, feeling like at least he spoke his truth to those he felt were oppressing him somehow.

We are still in Epiphany, in the time when we learn about what Jesus is revealing to us in his coming into our lives. What is being revealed here? It is hard to say, because Jesus, quite simply, goes off on his hometown. Without provocation, but clearly with the expectation that provocation will come eventually, he just goes for broke and calls out his town for their xenophobia and exclusivity. He reminds them that Elijah cared for a widow who was ‘from away’, from Sidon. He reminds them that Elisha healed none of the lepers of Jerusalem, but instead healed Namaan from Syria. A widow and wealthy man, both Gentiles, were the recipients of the blessings, healing and grace of God, not the residents to whom they had been called to prophesy and preach. Basically, Jesus says to his hometown friends and neighbors, “Listen, I am not some little boy from your past. You think I came here to heal you? You think you are all that? You think I owe you? Well, Elijah and Elisha

didn't heal within their community and I am not about to do it either. You don't take care of the orphans and widows. You don't heal your sick. And yet God has told you to over and over again. Instead, you reject the prophets who told you such things. Why should I do those things for you now?" It is pretty harsh.

Jesus knows too much about his hometown. And they know too much about him. "Isn't this Joseph's boy?" Are they proud of Jesus? Or are they dismissive because this is the boy who...what? Threw a rock through Mrs. Herrick's window when he moved into town? Stole candy from Mrs. Jenson's candy jar when she left her front door open? Threw snowballs at Mr. Sengstock's Corvette when he drove by the brick wall on Rudolph Avenue? Tried to date Mr. Holliday's daughter?

I try to imagine what it would be like to go to my hometown and preach at the church of some of the boys in my Industrial Arts class all those years ago. Is this why Jesus says "no prophet gains acceptance in his native place" (Lk 4:24)?" Perhaps. People just know too much about him.

And perhaps this is why Jeremiah is nervous about being called to be a prophet to Jerusalem. Jeremiah knows too much about the people of his day and age. Jeremiah follows the traditional formula of Old Testament prophets by hearing the call of God and then denying the call. "I know not how to speak", he says, echoing Moses, who denies his call, if I am not mistaken, at least ten times total. "I am too young", Jeremiah says.

But God assures Jeremiah that God will always be with him (Jer 1:19). This is good because Jeremiah will be universally reviled for what he has to say. The life of a prophet was not one of glory and welcome, by and large. Prophets of God are called to do a scary thing. They are called to call out the truth about God and the truth about the people of God. No one likes being called out, especially publicly. Prophets are very public about calling out the truth about God's people. Remember, the word 'jeremiad', which means an excoriating attack on a group of people's behavior and unbelief, comes from Jeremiah's name.

For you and I, we must do the hard work of discerning what to say when, what the truth might be in a particular situation. This is what we spoke about last week, when we discussed local customs and God's eternal words. Last week, we were just concerned about figuring it all out so that when we speak we are aiming towards God and God's love for us and all people. But this week, we see some of the outcome of what happens when God's word is spoken into a group of people. Today's reading is the potential outcome to all that deep, important work of discernment and seeking after truth.

Now, I want to be clear. I don't think I need to defend God or Jesus to you. When I read what Jesus says to the Nazarenes of his hometown, I wonder to myself if Jesus was just having a really bad day, which is what I also wonder when he randomly kills a fig tree for no good reason in Mark 11. Maybe the weight of being the Son of God was just too much to handle in his hometown and he looked out over the synagogue and saw all the parochialism, all the exclusivity, all the narrowness from his childhood and took a deep breath, like I did with Bill L, and decided, "The heck with it, let's do it", and he lets loose on them.

Regardless of what is going on here, though, we get a glimpse of where the story of Jesus is headed. It probably wouldn't have mattered if Jesus tried to finesse what he had to say. It probably wouldn't have mattered if Jeremiah had finessed what he had to say. The outcome would still be the same. The people will destroy the one God has sent to speak God's word to them. In the Beatitudes, Jesus says, "11 Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt 5:12).

One of the hazards of the call of God is the possibility of persecution and rejection. One of the hazards of

ministry is that, if you are pushed to the edge, the people of God will take you to the edge of the cliff as well. Back in the days of civil rights, many a pastor were forced out of their congregations when they called for alliance with the black churches against segregation. I knew a woman in college whose father was forced out of the pulpit because he advocated nuclear disarmament. Kate and I watched one of the pastors of my ordaining church in Minneapolis be forced out and pushed to the edge of the cliff. But it doesn't have to be a pastor. Any one of you may have found yourself in the position of speaking truth into a difficult situation only to find yourself backed up against the wall, pushed to the edge of the cliff or watching the teacher walk out of the room leaving you to the wolves.

Right at the end of today's story is this very strange statement: "But passing through the midst of them, he went on his way." What happened? This didn't happen for me. This hasn't happened for my friends in similar situations. But here, Jesus, like a magician, slips out of the bonds, passes through the midst of the crowd and goes on his way. The people part and let him walk through. Or he somehow is at the edge of the cliff and then is on the other side of the crowd in some mystical maneuver or gesture. I don't know, but it is a strange way to phrase what seems like a simple thing, which I think would be something like, "The people yelled and carried on. Jesus looked at them, walked into the crowd and left."

Maybe Jesus projected the authority of God which he carried with him and the people parted like the Red Sea for Moses (Ex 14:21) or the Jordan River for Joshua (Jos 4:7). Maybe, without saying it, the people knew that somehow, Jesus was in fact "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). It is a strange moment, and yet it is a telling moment, in the life of Jesus, this moment with the people of Nazareth. We want our Jesus to be soft and lovely. We want Jesus to be all love all the time. But this is a harsh, prickly, provocative Jesus. Jesus, finally, as the light of the world, divides as much as unifies, breaks things open as much as heals, creates standoffs as much as opportunities for community.

"Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword", Jesus says in Matthew 10:34. We see what he means in this story today. When Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, he tells him, "This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil" (Jn 3:19). The epiphany, the revelation, that Jesus brings to us on this fourth Sunday of Epiphany is that the light separates, that God's word creates reaction and kickback, that the call of God to Jeremiah, to Jesus, to you and I is not a guarantee of smooth sailing and happy days.

And yet, Jesus passes through. Can we let Jesus pass through our midst? Conflict is always about people taking sides and deciding their side is the truth. But when Jesus is in our midst, the only truth is Jesus. Remember last week? The only absolute, the only true thing, is God and God alone. Jesus passed through their midst and went on his way. Can we let Jesus call us out? I don't think we are really capable of it. We want to fight the truth that Jesus calls out of us. We would rather not face what Jesus has to tell us about ourselves. Between your reaction and the truth, can you let Jesus pass through the midst of it? Between our need to maintain our self-justifications and the truth of Jesus Christ, can we just let Jesus walk through? Will we follow him through the crowd, or will we shout and scream with the others to throw him over the cliff?

See, at the table, where we share with one another the bread and the cup of Christ's promise, we let go of the oppositional way of being. We recognize God's call on us. We know that sometimes when we speak truth to the powers that be, we will pay the cost. We know, as with last week, sometimes when we think we know the truth, we really don't. Between who we think we are and the promises of God, can we let Jesus pass through and

go on his way? In the parting, in that moment of peace and grace which is the presence of Christ, the hem of his robe touching you as you reach out for it, is the healing of the bread, the body, and the cup, the blood, of Christ. This is where we allow Jesus to pass through our midst. This is where we let go of our conflicts and reactions. This is how we come to the table. Amen.