

“Dangerous gospel”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
February 13, 2022

Luke 6:17-26

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Some years ago I walked into a church in Greece, many hundreds of years old. The walls were covered with artwork. In the outer narthex were vivid, awful pictures of hell. Apparently, the unconfirmed had to stand out there during worship, facing the torment that awaited them. A few minutes there, and I was ready to be saved! A few minutes there and even this decently and in order Presbyterian standing before you today could have learned to lie prostrate on the floor, or speak in tongues, or—dare we imagine it?—clap in rhythm. I couldn’t wait to get into the sanctuary and bask in its paintings of comfort and peace. As the docent opened the doors, and as I waited for the relief to wash over me, I stood before a large painting of a man being devoured by lions. OK, I thought to myself, surely the next one will be better. Nope, that guy’s getting beheaded. And that guy’s getting stabbed. And that one’s getting stoned. One wall after another was covered with the graphic images of martyrdom.

Apparently, some churches have beautiful stained glass windows of streams, flowers, and rainbows. Others have people without heads.

Personally, I like my head. If that had been my introduction to Christianity, I think I would have kept looking for a better option—maybe a nice religion where I get to grow old and die peacefully in my bed... with my head securely attached.

Of course, Jesus never makes that promise. While he certainly doesn’t tell us to seek out suffering, and while he desires peace and joy for us, he also warns that following him means suffering: “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man.” And that’s perhaps where that old church in Greece got something right. As creepy as those images were, they were a faithful reminder that this path with Jesus is not easy. It’s a lifetime of sacrifice and unbroken love; it’s crossing deserts to offer a handful of water to someone who may throw it back in your face—and then doing it all over again.

Jesus doesn’t say, “*If* you are reviled and persecuted...” He says, “*When* you are reviled and persecuted...” The gospel of Christ’s radical love is dangerous. You *will* suffer if you follow him. You *will* feel like a failure. You *will* be criticized, deprived, misunderstood, attacked. Because that is precisely what the world did to Jesus. James Howell asks, “If his faithful commitment to the God he called ‘Abba’ cost Jesus his life, why should following him be comfortable and pain-free? Why would we expect to find ourselves in sync with a world that is so out of sync with God?”

Discipleship is costly. We get it. But it still begs the question: why would we ever follow Jesus if it’s so hard? How could such a life ever be described as blessed?

There’s a conversation taking place all over this nation, around dinner tables and in family rooms, which might just hold the key to what’s happening here between Jesus and his disciples, between Jesus and us. It’s called “The Talk.” Somewhere, today, African American parents are sitting down with their children and preparing them for a world that will judge, fear, and hate them based on the color of their skin—a world that will police them, incarcerate them, maybe kill them. It’s a talk Jenna and I had to be trained on before adopting Emerson. It’s a talk that is desperate to prepare children for a harsh and unjust world, yet still hold onto their dignity, their capacity for love, their faith that it can, and should, be better.

It’s a talk that Jesus needs to have with you and me. Because he needs us to know what’s coming. And he needs us to know what we’re holding onto.

In the film “The Hate U Give,” a father sits down with his children and has this very talk. He tells them how the world will treat them. But he does more than that; he also tells them that how the world treats them doesn’t define them. He

says, “Now just because you got to deal with this mess, don’t you ever forget that being black is an honor because you come from greatness.”

What he offers them, in the midst of his fear for their safety, is the blessing of an identity so strong, so rooted, that they can be proud, and brave, and compassionate, even when the world is not. It’s the promise that if they remember who they are and to whom they belong, they won’t get lost in the ugliness; they’ll come out on the other side.

I imagine that Jesus was similarly afraid for his disciples. He knew what the world would do to them. And I have no doubt that it brought more than a few tears. He tells them what to expect, so at least they’ll be prepared. But like the father in the film, he does more; he gives them the blessing of an identity.

We aren’t blessed because we suffer. We are blessed because we know, thanks to the gospel, that what we suffer can’t take away who we are. And who are we? We are the children of God, brothers and sisters, bound in love, storm-battered but redeemed, walking in the steps of Jesus the Christ. We won’t cover it up. We won’t deny it. We won’t be ashamed of it. We won’t ever forget that being Christian is an honor because we come from greatness.

If you remember, if you love when they hate, if you speak true when they lie, if you give when they take, you will—you *will*—come out on the other side of that darkness. You know it because you follow in the footsteps of the One who has already done it.

That’s why we follow. Because on this path, we know who we are. Jesus may take us through hell, but he leads us to heaven. He says, “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven.” He’s not just talking about the afterlife. He’s talking about right now, this life. He’s talking about living in the kingdom of God. He’s talking about a life that matters. The only kind that matters. It’s what every parent wants for their children—even more than safety, even more than comfort and success. A life self-aware and proud, unbroken before the tide of hate, a life determined to be shared, witnessed, proclaimed in love. That’s heaven. That’s the kingdom of God.

Years later, in the film, the father knows that his teenage daughter is scared to follow a path that might cost her friends and make her family a target of violence. She’s wondering—just like we might—whether it’s really worth it to take the harder and more dangerous path. She’s scared to speak up after witnessing the death of her two friends, both unarmed, both loved, one at the hand of a gang and the other at the hand of a police officer. The father looks at her and points to a tattoo on his arm, bearing the names of his wife and children. He says that what you live for is what you die for. He says, “You, your brothers, and your mother, are my reasons to live and die.”

This is a father who knows who he is, what he’s about, and whom he loves. He will go all the way for that knowledge. All the way for that love. That’s what makes the harder and more dangerous path—the harder and more dangerous gospel—worth it.

Martin Luther King Jr. said in Selma: “I can’t promise you that it won’t get you beaten. I can’t promise you that it won’t get your home bombed. I can’t promise you won’t get scarred up a bit—but we must stand up for what is right. If you haven’t discovered something that is worth dying for, you haven’t found anything worth living for.”

That’s what Jesus offers us: the gospel may be dangerous; it may lead you to speak unpopular truths, to preach justice, to love the ones we’re told not to love, to wrestle with mystery and doubt, to weep and grieve; but it’s the only life worth living. It’s a life knowing that Jesus has got our name tattooed on his arm. Our name. A name he lived for. A name he died for. And it’s a life knowing that we are marked with the same tattoo. We are his witness. We live for his name, and the names of his children, and for our name. So don’t you ever forget that being a Christian is an honor because you come from greatness. Don’t you ever forget. **Amen.**