

Lectionary 12A 2017, Matthew 10²⁴⁻³⁹, June 25, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

There is an old saying that speaks of the purpose of the God's Word. The Word of God is a message that seeks to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.

That is, the good news concerning Jesus Christ is truly good news to those who are weighed down by hardship and tragedy. It is a message of hope to those who suffer injustice and cruelty. The good news of Jesus says to those whose dignity is trampled upon, who are outcast and untouchable by society's standards that they are precious to God, and the cross of Christ shows that violence is ultimately a dead end. This is the good news of comfort to any who are afflicted by the world, by heartless and cruel people, or by disease, death and violence.

On the other hand, to those whose lives are comfortable, who go through this world with blinders on, who refuse to acknowledge the needs of their fellow human beings, the Word of God can be an affliction. "Do not fear those who kill the body," Jesus says in our gospel reading, "rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." God's Word confronts us with a word of judgment against our complacency and our compromises, when we really should be standing up for what is right, and good and just.

Comfort to the afflicted and affliction to the comfortable. God's Word is a balanced word, a message which must be spoken and heard in its fullness in order to be his Word. When one part of the message is silenced God will send a prophet to speak the missing part in order to restore the balance. This was the mission of prophets like Jeremiah, whose word of affliction strikes at the comfortable Israelites. Israel loved their comfort and hated the prophets God sent. I suppose this is true of every comfortable age, including the one we currently enjoy. Prophetic voices just aren't very popular. It's easy to dismiss prophets as cranks and kooks, or rabble rousers.

Today's readings hold out before us this dual character of God's message as comfort to the afflicted and affliction to the comfortable. That's how I hear it anyway. When Jesus says he comes "to set a man against his father, daughter against her mother, that one's foes will be members of one's own household," I'm not very comfortable. In fact, I squirm. I love my family, more than anything else in the world. I'd walk over hot coals and take a bullet for my family. So when Jesus says this I really hope he's talking about someone else other than me.

But his words are clear. "Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." And just before this, words that seem to sear into my ears, "Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I will also deny before my Father in heaven." I am reminded of last month's attack on three busloads of Christians in Egypt, travelling to a monastery on a pilgrimage. These were families, fathers and mothers along with their children. The men were the first. Ordered to kneel on the ground with a gun to their heads, they were commanded to recite the "Shahada" which is the Islamic declaration of faith.

Here is where this story haunts me. For I ask myself, what would I do? Reciting the Islamic declaration of faith becomes a denial of the Lordship of Jesus. But would reciting it save my life, and more importantly, would it save the lives of my family? When confronted with the possibility of imminent death what do you do?

Now I know these were terrorists who attacked this bus, and these weren't real Muslims who demanded these Christians deny Jesus and embrace Islam. They weren't Muslims any more than Timothy McVeigh was a Christian before he blew up the building in Oklahoma City killing hundreds of people. Nevertheless, this was a situation of which Jesus anticipates for his followers when he says, 'Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.' By refusing to deny Jesus as Lord, these Egyptian Christians were killed. But their souls live. They are witnesses, true martyrs, to the promises of Jesus. They are acknowledged before their Father in heaven by Jesus for their witness. Even though they lost their lives, they have found them.

God's Word at times is sharp, like a two-edged sword. But it is sword like it is so for a reason. For God's word here is meant to separate us from those things which keep us from loving God with our whole hearts. When Jesus spoke these words we heard today your family was everything. You depended upon your family all throughout your life, from birth until death. As a child your parents clothed you and fed you. As an adult it was your solemn and expected duty to take care of your aging parents. As you aged beyond the years of labor you depended upon your children to take care of you. Nevertheless, love of God always comes first. If an adult became a Christian and their spouse or their father demanded that they leave Christianity Jesus is saying that love and obedience to God comes first, before love of family. And that decision had real implications. It just might mean you could no longer count on your family taking care of you.

And here's where I admit to another struggle, not only in preaching these words for today but in trying to actually live them. Jesus imagines real life and death situations, or situations that family and social life is disrupted and even torn apart because of one's faith in Christ. But that's not the situation we live in today. Our choices are not that stark. Our faith in Christ is not called to stand up to life or death. And so I wonder, and I worry, how we hear these words today. Do we hear them as the very real challenge they are meant to be? And do we hear them for the very real promise of hope and comfort they are meant to be as well?

Still every age creates its own idols and gods and temptations standing in the way of loving God with our whole heart and mind and strength. Maybe these aren't as stark as making a confession of faith in the face of death. But they can be just as damaging to the soul. Like the vanity license plate I recently saw on a very fancy and expensive car, turning into a very rich neighborhood with big homes. The license plate said "Hedonist." Now wealth is not itself a bad thing. Lots of good is accomplished by those who are wealthy. The wealth possessed by this person is not in of itself the problem, but by advertising himself as a hedonist it seemed clear to me that love of earthly pleasure purchased by wealth was the number one priority in this person's life and that God, if he was even thought about, took a distant place on the priority list.

John Calvin, the great Swiss reformer who lived about the same time as Martin Luther, famously said "the human heart is a factory of idols." If we can imagine it we can worship it. Jesus though promises a way to love him above all, though. His promise comes through the very thing we are called to carry, the cross. Through the cross Jesus himself demonstrates that nothing, no temptation, no calling, will deter him from loving us so completely and totally. Not even his own life is more precious than his love for us. Jesus calls us to love him above all else because he himself loved God and others more than anything, including his own life. Through his willingness to suffer the humiliation of the cross on our behalf he is shown to be worthy of our love and worship and devotion.

In the end God's Word today is both a word of judgment and a word of hope. It judges us when we fail to love God with our whole hearts. It afflicts us in our comfort to keep things the way they are, to love a God that makes very few demands on us, a convenient kind of God who

really doesn't mean it when he says to love him above anything else, including our very own lives. But this is a comfort we cannot stay in, for God wants our love as our first love. But his Word is also a word of hope, a word which comforts us by promising us that we will find our lives, when we are willing to give them up for his sake. Amen.