

Sermon Preached June 22, 2014
Year A, Proper 7
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
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Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

“A lawyer was briefing his client, who was about to testify in his own defense. ‘You must swear to tell the complete truth. Do you understand?’ The client replied that he did. Then lawyer then asked, ‘Do you know what will happen if you don’t tell the truth?’ The client looked back and said, ‘I imagine that our side will win.’”¹

¹ <http://www.ahajokes.com/law072.html>, 6/21/14

Martin Niemoller was a Lutheran pastor in Germany during World War II. He made a famous observation after the war in which he said:

In Germany they first came for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.

Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Catholics,
and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.

Then they came for me -
and by that time no one was left to speak up.

Over the years, Neimoller's comments have become famous. But initially he was an unlikely hero of the Nazi resistance. Neimoller had been a U-boat captain in WW I prior to becoming a pastor. And he supported Hitler prior to his taking power.

Indeed, initially the Nazi press held him up as a model... for his service in WW I. But Niemoller broke very early with the Nazis. In 1933, he organized the Pastor's Emergency League to protect Lutheran pastors from the police. In 1934, he was one of the leading organizers at the Barmen Synod, which produced the theological basis for the German Confessing Church which, despite its persecution, became an enduring symbol of German resistance to Hitler.

Niemoller was protected until 1937 by both the foreign press and influential friends in the up-scale Berlin suburb where he preached. Eventually, he was arrested for treason. Perhaps due to foreign pressure, he was found guilty, but initially given only a suspended sentence. He was however then almost immediately re-arrested on Hitler's direct orders.

From then on until the end of WW II, he was held at the Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps. Near the end of the war, he narrowly escaped execution.²

As Jesus sends his disciples out to preach the gospel, heal, and teach he says, “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves.” He knows that what the disciples are doing will be unpopular with some folks. Regarding those who would malign them Jesus says, “Have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.” Jesus is talking about proclaiming the truth of the kingdom of God, that we are to live in justice, mercy, and peace.

² from Charles Colson’s “Kingdoms in Conflict” and Newsweek, July 10, 1937, pg 32.

The Kingdom of God is a place of justice, where all evil will be made known. It's the place where all our secrets will be revealed, so we might as live in a way that can bear the light of truth. Jesus is telling his disciples to live and proclaim the justice of the Kingdom to the world. Shout it from the housetops!

Tied into this commandment to proclaim the truth is the commandment not to fear humanity. God is the one we should fear. And when I say fear I don't mean be scared of God, but to hold him in awe and respect. But it's easier to fear other people than to fear God. Telling the truth, pointing out evil and injustice, saying things that people don't want to hear, bringing to light those things which they don't want uncovered, gets people angry at you.

We often don't want to point out injustice because it might get us in trouble. This is what Pastor Neimoller addresses in his statement. He didn't want to make waves at first. He let people be carted off. Neimoller is pointing out the importance of telling the gospel truth. As we know from his story, when he did start telling the truth about the evils of Nazism, he was persecuted. He was put in a concentration camp. He was almost killed. But he was ultimately convinced that, like Jesus said, fear and respect and love of God is what should motivate our actions, not fear of people.

There's a story that the morning after his first imprisonment, he was visited by a prison chaplain, also a Lutheran minister, who expressed surprise that his colleague was there. "Brother, what did you do?"

Why are you here?” he asked. Niemoller replied, “Brother, given what's happening in our country, why are you not here?” Neimoller is scolding his brother pastor for not being a truth-teller. For not standing up against evil, even if it puts him in prison.

There are lots of other examples of truth-tellers. In a book on the life of Harriet Tubman, the courageous liberator of slaves, a story is told about an accident that nearly ended her life as a teenager. She tried to stop the beating of a fellow slave and was struck on the head by a blow from her master. It broke her skull. She lingered near death for weeks afterward. For the rest of her life she suffered catatonic spells because of the injury. Yet, the injury would also be Harriet Tubman’s liberation.

After her recovery she knew that no human being could ever really harm her. Ultimately she had to answer to a higher authority. “The blow that cracked Tubman’s skull struck off her psychic chains. She had already died once; she had nothing to lose.”³ She had to proclaim the truth about the evils of slavery and do all in her power to stop it.

But pointing out injustice and evil aren’t only majestic actions which get us a place in the history books, they play out in our lives every day. For instance, calling people or organizations out when they are racist or sexist or homophobic, or anti-Islamic, or derogatory to others in any way.

Or naming social injustices when the powers that be may be content to call them “progress,” or “misunderstands,” or

³ William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 27, No. 2, p. quoting Gary Wills, *Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, p. 41.

claim that they are beyond their ability to fix. Sometimes our proclaiming and working for the gospel will cause someone else to lose money, or power, or face, and they will dislike or even hate us for it. We can become understandably scared.

But Jesus says, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell... So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

Imagine being at a dinner party where someone cracks a joke which denigrates a certain segment of humanity. It's easy to laugh politely and think, “Oh, I don't want to be a wet blanket. I don't want to make an issue at a dinner party. I'll just let it slide.” Or do you

proclaim the truth? Do you not laugh and perhaps say out loud, “That’s inappropriate. You are better than that.” That comment might make you an unpopular dinner companion, but it also proclaims the Kingdom of God. We don’t want to look for ways to hurt those who have been caught saying the wrong thing, but noting when something evil has been said or done alerts people when they have crossed the line.

What about seeing wrongdoing or injustice at our place of work? Do we let it go for fear of losing our job? Or do we speak up? These are powerful and scary questions. Our livelihood may depend on how we answer. But so may how we look at ourselves in the mirror.

I was just reading that Pope Francis has made a gutsy move. Yesterday he traveled to the heartland of the mafia

in Italy and said “Those who in their lives follow this path of evil, as mafiosi do, are not in communion with God.

They are excommunicated.” He told the crowd: “This evil must be fought against, it must be pushed aside. We must say no to it.” All I could think of was- that I hope he has a food taster.

I would add that self-examination is also a component of proclaiming the gospel. We are well served by engaging in our own moral inventories, seeking that which WE fear coming to light. What injustices do we ourselves harbor? We all have shortcomings. Humility is an important companion to the proclamation.

I am reminded of that wonderful Saturday Night Live character from years ago, “The Church Lady,” who was very quick to point out the failings of others without taking

the log out of her own eye! Fortunately, God is forgiving of all, including us, who seek forgiveness of any wrongs we have done. And we will stumble as we try to declare and live the gospel truth, but God is there to catch us.

Jesus tells us to proclaim the gospel, but that sometimes the gospel message is hard to hear, sometimes others (or even we) are going to be unhappy with what it reveals. That is why Jesus says, “do not fear,” three times in this passage.

In the short run, proclaiming and living the gospel may get us into trouble with even members of our household, but in the long run we have nothing to fear because if what we do is of God, the Almighty will look out for us. Jesus does not

desire conflict in families, but peace without justice is not peace. If we can't proclaim and live the justice, love, and mercy of the gospel, then there can never be real peace between us.

As Christians, we are truth-tellers, we speak out and work against evil, and we live in the justice, goodness, and mercy of the gospel. Amen.