

3rd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 6.21.20

Psalm 69:7-10, [11-15], 16-18

It is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that shame has covered my face.⁸ I have become a stranger to my kindred, an alien to my mother's children.⁹ It is zeal for your house that has consumed me; the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.¹⁰ When I humbled my soul with fasting, they insulted me for doing so.¹¹ When I made sackcloth my clothing, I became a byword to them.¹² I am the subject of gossip for those who sit in the gate, and the drunkards make songs about me.¹³ But as for me, my prayer is to you, O Lord. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me. With your faithful help¹⁴ rescue me from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters.¹⁵ Do not let the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the Pit close its mouth over me.¹⁶ Answer me, O Lord, for your steadfast love is good; according to your abundant mercy, turn to me.¹⁷ Do not hide your face from your servant, for I am in distress—make haste to answer me.¹⁸ Draw near to me, redeem me, set me free because of my enemies.

Matthew 10:24-39

Jesus said, "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master;²⁵ it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.²⁷ What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.²⁸ 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.²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted.³¹ So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.³² "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven;³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.³⁴ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;³⁶ and one's foes will be members of one's own household.³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;³⁸ and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (568)

Christians are not persecuted in the United States. There are places in the world where Christians are persecuted; the U.S. is not one of them. Yes, the church has become less of a cultural force in our country. Yes, clergy are less revered than in the past, and churchgoers are less assumed to be the finest people of all.

The causes for this diminution are many and varied.

There was the change in immigration laws in the 60s. This opened a way for immigrants from non-Christian countries to come to the United States in greater number than ever before. The country is therefore now less a Protestant stronghold than it once and long was.

There's been a strong current of exclusive humanism and secularism in popular Western thought. The imminent frame—the material, provable frame—came to be assumed as the only frame, the pull of the transcendent and the unknowable dismissed as illusion, or deception. Meanwhile, the mainline church had become so comfortable with its hegemony that we'd long lost the ability to make a case for ourselves, to witness to the reality and on-going activity of God, who is (yes) imminent among all, but also is transcendent over all—and not provable at all.

There has more recently been the outing of a lot of monstrous behavior on the part of clergy, from televangelists to parish priests. This perhaps most of all has sullied our reputation, and not just here in the U.S. but throughout the Christian West. We'll be decades, maybe centuries, in earning back the trust, if ever we can.

Then there's the cozying up of religious authority to political power, which has revealed a cynicism and opportunism among the apparently pious that is ugly indeed.

Finally, and perhaps most abstrusely, is the flawed theology that drives a lot of Protestant thought, whose flaws are becoming insurmountable—but that's a whole other sermon, or maybe my whole career.

All this has contributed to a decline in social standing of the Christian faithful, which, though we might feel it as injurious, is not in fact injurious.

Christians are not persecuted in the United States, and the degree to which we feel it otherwise, is the degree to which our faith is false. The degree to which our faith relies on a sense of injury in order to generate strong feeling and commitment, is the degree to which our Christianity is a tribal identity rather than a faith practice which generates a new sort of communion, a beloved community.

I had a strange week with these texts. I kept trying to figure out how they fit. These which each speak in a voice of one deeply injured, or that prepare people for suffering deep injury, and all because of their testimony of faith or their devotion to God: how do they fit into some lived experience *we're* having? This, for how they might become relatable and thus preachable. Where do these texts come home to us?

That's often the question I bear in mind when reading the scripture passages for the coming Sunday. Where do these texts come home to us? Where does this reading come to play in my being or imagining, which might relate to your being or imagining?

And often they *do* come home, but sometimes they don't.

That always makes for a tough week.

It isn't uncommon in our tradition that faithful testimony comes out of injurious circumstance, even traumatic circumstance. Really, the Judeo-Christian tradition is one of a long series of voices that speak out of profound wounding, whether social trauma or individual trauma.

Consider, this whole tradition began among an enslaved people, the Hebrews gathered by a call—called out of Egypt to serve an altogether different sort of Lord. Out of that degraded position in society, the Hebrews became a people. In fact, it's valid to consider these so-called Hebrews not as a race of people (a people, that is, who all share the same bloodline and ancestry) but as a class of people, a large smattering of individuals who found themselves in the same social position—and it's by this position that they became generated as a people. It's by their shared injury that they became a social group, a position of enslavement out of which they were eventually called to become a people of God.

The question then is, how much does that ancient injustice and injury need to be nursed in order to sustain the people as a people—or is the mission of being in love enough to generate purpose?

Consider, too, we Gentiles were adopted into this tradition because of a similarly wounded Messiah, a Christ who was killed, which speaks to and of a God who could suffer murder and yet could live on as the most powerful force there is—being itself, generated in the world by love and as love. Of course, it's all the more the case for those who count themselves among the church that we share not a bloodline or a common ancestry but a shared story that generates our familial tie.

The question then is, how much does that long-ago wounding of our savior need to be nursed in order to sustain our conviction in faith—or is the mission of being in love enough to generate purpose?

Because it could be the latter. That this is a story of a crucified God, that this is a story of the ultimate power, the truest authority, being one who submits to vulnerability and even suffers:

this turns the world upside down. This notion that there is power in vulnerability, that there is even ultimate power in the most terrible, tragic vulnerability: it turns the world upside down.

And not everyone has been enamored of it.

Frederic Nietzsche is the most notorious of these, taking issue with the warping of morality that this deification of wounding let loose in the world. He hated the so-called slave morality this let loose, the surrendering of the master morality that he claimed to prefer. When we worship the wounded one, he could see, any claim we might make regarding our own wounding can become the ultimate trump card, so to speak. Where we've been wounded becomes generative of our whole identity. "I am injured, therefore I am worthy. I am oppressed, therefore I am morally superior." So, we go off in search of our own wounding—and we nurse those wounds because in them we find our power.

He hated this potentiality in the church, this potentiality *because* of the church. He thought it would warp all relating in a liberal society—a rush to a sense of injury, a competition as to whose wounding was deepest and most profound.

I think in basketball it's called drawing a foul. You can score a lot of points this way.

A funny aside: I've always been a writer, some of my earliest play all about writing. I even wrote a book when I was five years old, which my mother still has. It's made of lined paper, scotch-taped together to open backwards, text and illustration all in red marker. The title is *Me and My Bad Times I've Had*, and it features the sorts of tragic occurrences that you can only find amidst the mild childhood I withstood. Growing up on the seacoast of New Hampshire in a modest subdivision, the youngest of two daughters in a family of four, with a dog, and a swing set and playhouse in the backyard, I *suffered*. Once a bee sting, another time a burnt finger on a hot stove, many times an allergic overreaction to the poison ivy that grew all over the region, this was rough.

Isn't it striking, though, that I seemed to know even at that young age how to win sympathy and establish standing: by airing my suffering, by nursing my wounds. Sure, it was a problem that all my wounds had come by accident, were not by someone else's doing. My wounds, in short, gave me no one to blame—which is where the real generative power is, in resentment, *ressentiment*, as Nietzsche coined it (though, as I remember it, it was my mom who turned on that stove burner. Just sayin'.) Having someone to *blame* for your injury: this is where you can really generate something lively.

Jeremiah wasn't so lucky to have someone to blame—I mean other than God.

Jeremiah, in the reading we didn't hear this morning, proves himself as the “weeping prophet” as he's come to be known. He prophesied at a time for the people that was traumatic—the downfall of Judah following the downfall of Israel. This was when Babylon at long last attacked the nation, the city, the Temple; and took the people into exile, captives in chains, all but those they left behind amidst the rubble (the old, the sickly, the poor, the weak, the ones who wouldn't bring any benefit to their captors, would just be a drag). Jeremiah saw all this coming. By watching the waywardness of the people, by listening to the Lord whose will for them was to live humbly rather than to die full of bellicosity and swagger, Jeremiah saw the whole tragedy coming—like a forecaster of COVID, like a forecaster of climate. They do the numbers and they add up to catastrophe, but no one listens. Poor suckers, those prophets.

But once it had come, the people were too downtrodden to continue to rail against them, so Jeremiah turned his ire to God: “O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, ‘Violence and destruction!’ For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.”

As for the psalmist, from whom we did hear this morning, the source of injury is similar. The one speaking has become alienated from his or her people because of this one's devotion to God. This zeal has cost this one, or perhaps this whole people—cost them their good standing among their neighbors. People mock this one for being so faithful, an experience like sinking in mire or being swallowed up in a pit. There is no high status in this devotion, nor even basic respect, though there is the hope that the Lord will rescue and redeem.

The gospel reading has Jesus anticipating something like this for those earliest apostles, but even more intimidating than just scorn, even more destructive. Still speaking to them as he had been in the reading we heard last week, Jesus was yet preparing his disciples to be sent out as now apostles, taking on much the same hardship Jesus will have taken on.

People considered Jesus demonic. Beelzebul they called him, “lord of the flies,” and so the people would also call these twelve, all the more maligning.

People would aim to kill Jesus for his ministry upending the powers and principalities of this world, and so they would aim to kill the apostles who did likewise in his name.

But they shouldn't fear this, for they stood for something greater than their own survival, beloved though they were.

And they were fools if they thought Jesus' coming would bring peace, though they would come to recognize Jesus not as the lord of the flies but as the Prince of Peace. They were fools if they thought his peace through justice wouldn't be met with serious resistance, even deadly resistance. People who have immunity from their own acting unjustly will defend even to the death their continued immunity. Injustice is a hard habit to break. So, they should very well expect that Jesus' coming would be as divisive as a sword, dividing those who desired true justice from those who'd settle for what's settled.

For all this they should be as Jesus urged them to be in a portion of this preaching that we didn't hear. They should be as he urged them, wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

This is a surprisingly intense commissioning coming at but the beginning of their work. They were yet months, maybe a couple years, away from when it would all come to that. They were a far distance from the cross. It wouldn't come to such dreadful circumstance for a long while yet. Meanwhile, they could enjoy the work of healing and teaching, restoring and making whole—which had me wonder all week, why is this here? Neither Mark nor Luke remember Jesus' original commissioning of the apostles to be so heightened and of such high stakes. Why, then, does Matthew remember it this way, a risky prospect from the very beginning? And what are we to make of it, we whose faith will likely never have us suffer the sort of consequences for discipleship those earliest disciples would eventually know?

Most of all, it had me wonder, does it matter? Does it matter that our own faithfulness to the gospel will likely not come home to us so dreadfully, so frightfully? Does it matter that our own discipleship will likely not come at such a cost as crucifixion or even social shunning? Is suffering *required* here? One blogger I read in studying up on these scripture readings asked as much, *confessed* as much, writing, "I often wonder what the lack of persecution in my life says about how little I have actually taken up my cross. And each time I wonder about this, I am fearful."

This guilt, though, about not suffering to the degree as seems required suggests a perversion of what Jesus was saying here—for he wasn't saying you must suffer, he was saying you

must not live and serve in such a way as prevents you from suffering, and this is different. We're not to nail ourselves to a cross in order to call ourselves Christian. We're rather to live and serve in such a way as might put us at risk of suffering, yet we nonetheless continue so to live and serve.

What's more, this seeking out suffering, this even self-imposing of suffering, which is a sort of self-satisfied, even decadent, proving of our own faithfulness, is a circling in the same neighborhood as those whose faith relies on a sense of injury, those whose faith finds its greatest strength from nursing a wound, and then ginning up resentment.

It's interesting to me that, when Jesus returned to the disciples following his having been crucified, returned to them resurrected while they were yet locked away in fear, and when they had asked to see his wounds, which he then showed them, he didn't dwell on them, he certainly glory in them or use them to gin up resentment and then vengeance. No, he moved right on to peace. "Peace be with you," he said, and then breathing on them the Holy Spirit, he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

The fact of the wounded Christ and of the murdered God is not to have us glorify in wounding per se, and neither to glorify in our own wounds—though I'm well aware that many hearing this have indeed been hurt. Either through personal trauma or systemic prejudice, you may well have deep wounds, or tough scars. I know I do, pretty easy childhood notwithstanding. These, though, are to be as openings to a suffering world that we're called to love. These are to be as opening ways into a world that knows deep suffering and that is beloved of a God who knows deep suffering as well.

I've heard from more than a few members of these two congregations I serve about how deeply offended you were at the show the president put on, posing with a Bible in front of a church on public land he'd just had taken by force from a public gathered in protest, which couldn't be more American. I submit one aspect of that offense is the president's trying to gin up grievance among the faithful, trying to gin up a sense of injury among those who look to the Bible in religious devotion and those who gather in churches seeking the presence and guidance of God. He was as if trying to defend us, by which he meant to convince us that we need defending (which we don't), that we are under attack (which we aren't), and that our best hope is in a strongman come to defend our faith (which it's not, and never will be, such a thing anathema to Christ's call regarding our discipleship).

See, I don't need my faith defended, and certainly not by a profligate abuse of flash bangs and tear gas—something I suspect you might feel as well. I don't need my faith defended because I don't organize my faith around a sense of injury. I'm not aggrieved or resentful. I love and serve Christ because I love and serve Christ. To the degree that I am able, which would have me strive to be ever more able, I do this, love and serve, simply because I do this, love and serve.

Admire that if you do.

Mock that if you wish.

I don't care either way, though, having been mocked in the past, I'll admit I don't like it. I guess I'm similar to the psalmist in that way

This suffering, though, is the smallest possible measure of suffering for the sake of the cross. I'm not hoping for more, but I'm not going to live in avoidance of that possibility.

It's a delicate walk, I'll grant you, an almost paradoxical one. Nietzsche recognized as much, and so apparently rejected it. I hope you'll recognize it, too, but join in.

Thanks be to God.