

16th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 9.4.16

Scripture: Jeremiah 18:1-11

Luke 14:25-33

I'm hiding out here, I feel I should tell you. In the woods, in this little church, in this tiny town, in this off-the-beaten-path county, closing out (on this very Sunday!) my 15th year, I'm hiding out.

Church growth? Not for me.

Extroverted evangelism? Nope.

You might say that I have this in common with Jesus. You *might* say that, at least as we meet him this morning. His intent in what he had to say to the people in this morning's lection seems to be in thinning out a crowd. "Now large crowds were traveling with him, and he turned to them and said..."

As to why large crowds might have been following him at this point, that's an open question.

He'd recently healed a crippled woman. He'd recently healed a man with dropsy. Maybe people were attracted by such wonder-working, such spectacle. Certainly spectacle has the power to draw a crowd. People will seek out something to see. Especially in the age before any sort of mass media—before any such thing could even have been imagined—people likely would have gone searching for something to see.

Then there's the draw of a crowd itself. A crowd has the power to gather still more of a crowd. While we were touring the "imperial cities" of Central Europe earlier this summer, sometimes we'd come upon the most compelling sites by noticing a crowd gathered and joining it in order to see what there was to see. And there it was, the Charles Bridge or Kafka's old office; there it was, the Hapsburg's summer palace or Budapest's city pool on this hot day.

But if it was these aspects that drew the crowd, it was likely these aspects that had Jesus wanting to dispel the crowd. He was not a mere wonder-worker out to do everyone's desperate bidding, after all, and he was not a spectacle that justifies itself as spectacular. He was on a mission, and it was a costly one. It would cost him his life. It might cost you yours if you choose to follow him—cost you your life or at least your life as you know it. So, you know, don't join this movement unless you're clear on the terms.

That said, the presence of the crowd was likely evidence that people weren't yet clear on the terms.

Jesus, it seems, wasn't so into church growth either.

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" —which begs the question, what did Jesus mean by "hate," and begs the answer that he didn't mean animus or enmity or hostility as much as he meant being fully prepared to let those things go should it come down to an ultimatum.

Were your father or mother to make you decide, "It's us or it's Jesus," were your spouse or sibling were to force a decision, "It's me or it's this church thing you're into," if such a divisive situation were thrust upon you, "It's your life as you know it or abundant life as God promises it," the people who mean to follow Christ should be prepared to lose whatever sits on the other side of that ultimatum, should "hate" whatever that is in the sense that it should have no hold on them, that it should have no hold on *us*.

It sounds far-fetched perhaps, but it *does* happen. I recently listened to a podcast that featured a young preacher whose story began when she joined a church and was baptized and so her parents kicked her out of the house. Jesus, to my hearing then, is recognizing that devotion to the gospel will be a threat to some people, that following in the way of peace by means of forgiveness will alienate those in life who have other agendas, and claiming the brand of Christ (or being claimed by it) will disturb those who have bias against the brand. It happened to Jesus' earliest followers —disowned by family, dismissed by community. It happens still today. It won't necessarily come down to such an ultimatum, but if it does then following Christ is the better way

But it gets worse: "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" —worse for this too named an immediate concern. The cross: this was no mere symbol in the lives of whoever was in that crowd that had come to follow Jesus. No, the cross was instead a commonplace threat, a terrifying possibility. The Roman Empire deployed crucifixion liberally, crosses planted in the ground outside the city wall of Jerusalem that cast the same terrorizing shadow as a lynching tree would have cast in the Jim Crow south. Really, unlike these days, the cross would have had no positive association to it at all. God's grace had not come to transform it; Christ's resurrection had not turned it upside down and

inside out. No one wore a cross as a piece of jewelry, either earnestly or ironically. No one hung one on the wall for devotional purposes or for any purpose at all.

Therefore, the phrase, “Carry your cross” would have had no poetic ring to it and it wouldn’t have been set to a tune in a major key. It would simply have served as a call to grave seriousness, a call to gravitas. This isn’t about rebellion against the given-ness of daily life. This isn’t about novelty or spectacle. Following Christ won’t earn you extra blessings and it won’t secure for yourself the good life or even the good afterlife. Rather, following Christ was and is a matter of enacting the beloved community as a witness to God’s steadfast promise regardless at what cost to oneself.

So don’t do it without first knowing the cost. Don’t do it without first counting the cost. This could well save the world—building up this beloved community. This might even save your soul—deepening your life so it abounds with purpose, redemption, and fulfillment. But it will demand of you like nothing has ever demanded of you, and you might only glancingly be satisfied for building up the kingdom is ever on-going, will never in our lifetimes be complete—this because God is ever coming and only in God’s coming is God fully here. So what glancing satisfaction there might be is in the anticipation of it all, the assured and confident anticipation of it all.

The story doesn’t say whether this sort of preaching worked. The story doesn’t say if the crowd dissipated at these dispelling words, if those following him shrank in number back to the small handful he’d earlier enjoyed, joining me as it were in hiding out.

The evening when I submitted a book proposal followed a Sunday when I led worship in Tyringham, which is a tinier congregation even than this one, yet has as many published authors in it—all of them Gilders. One of these, George, said to me following the service what he always says, “I’m waiting for your book.”

So I said what I always said, “I’m waiting for you to point me in the right direction.” But, since he didn’t, a few days later I emailed the editor of *Journal for Preachers*, which has published some of my sermons and solicited from me a few articles.

“Where should I explore publishing a collection of sermons?” I asked.

He emailed back the next evening, a snowy March evening before Daylight Savings Time ended, a dispiriting evening whose gloaming was particularly gray.

I had a glass of wine.

“Wipf & Stock,” he’d written. “A creative theological press in Eugene, Oregon.”

I logged onto their website while the boys did their homework, and I poured myself another glass of wine. I considered the sample chapter they asked for. “I don’t have a sample chapter,” I thought, and swallowed some wine. Then I considered the 600 or so sermons I have on my hard-drive, had another sip of wine, and sent off one I selected at random—not a great theological point but a moving story attached.

An email message that came in almost instantly told me to expect a reply within three months.

Six weeks later, I received notice that my proposal was accepted: I’d be a published author—of a book that perhaps no one would read or perhaps people I don’t even know might read.

It was hard to figure which would be worse.

I concluded I probably shouldn’t drink so much wine.

That was a year and a half ago, and since the book coming out last April a few people have read it. My mother has disseminated it widely around Seacoast New Hampshire. The bookstores of Berkshire County should have it in stock, as do the libraries in Monterey and Lenox, and at Colby College and Phillips Exeter.

I submitted an announcement for the alumni bulletins of all my alma maters, and the Exeter bulletin came out a week ago.

A classmate bought a copy. When halfway through it she was in touch via Facebook. When she’d finished it she was in touch via email.

A southerner, an Evangelical, she absolutely typified the very person I wanted never to have come across this book.

What about judgment, she wanted to know—and she asked with curiosity and just a thin patina of judgment. I seem to have “emphatically rejected the notion of judgment.” And she explained, “The reason this is curious to me, is that the thought (hope? terror?) of God’s coming judgment of the wicked colors the entire canon, from Genesis to the Psalms, to the Prophets, to the gospels, to Revelation. You recognize this periodically in your book, and yet you do everything in your power to explain it away, through parable-izing, flipping, even marvelous literary sleights of hand.”

I would delete the message.

No, I would answer right away.

No, I would sleep on it.

No, I'd write a draft of my thoughts and then revise the morning.

Judgment: "I don't think I explain away judgment," I wrote. "I trust God's judgment, trust God as judge, and hope in that judgment to shed honest light on human endeavors — every one of them falling far short of God's aim for the creation. I also fear that judgment because I know what it feels like to be judged rightly as not meeting the mark, and it hurts.

"That said," I continued, "it's condemnation that I doubt. I experience Christ's power to redeem the whole creation — the word 'salvation' meaning health or wholeness — more than I believe in any part of that creation as being beyond the power to redeem. There is scriptural evidence for this, and scriptural evidence contrary to it." And as to the scriptural evidence for it — of judgment not resulting in condemnation — I thought of Jeremiah's trip to the potter's shed, by grace one of the lections for this week.

I've only worked with clay once, in an art class long ago, but I remember the process picture-perfectly. I remember kneading it of its pocks and holes, these which, if allowed to remain in the clay would result in whatever I'd fashioned of it exploding in the kiln. I remember cutting the block of clay with a sharp wire so I could search it for holes or material foreign to it. I remember that preparing the clay for usefulness or for art was most of the process — working the problems out, working the weakness and imperfection out. And I remember, having fashioned the block into some certain shape, then gathering the leftover pieces of clay into a pile, using water to work the scrapes into one cohesive lump, ready now to be used for some other project. You didn't throw away your scraps. You didn't throw away anything. Every bit of material could be useful in the next project.

Jeremiah's Lord isn't a big ole' softie. No, the Lord as Jeremiah knew him wasn't someone who'd just let things slide because, you know, it's all good. No, indeed: this prophet's Lord was someone always calling the people Israel and Judah to task, calling them in judgment back from their perversions and injustices, from their indulgences and pride. The once United Kingdom of the Ancient Near East — Israel and Judah — had become divided once again, and then had fallen as vassal states to imperial power that seemed now to have God's grace and blessing as these two had once themselves had. The Lord was clear and

unapologetic for the fall of this beloved people to other worldly powers. That's the way history rolls, so sometimes you ride it and other times you get ridden over.

We hear it this morning: "Can I not do with you just as this potter has done — this potter who found that the vessel he was making became spoiled in his hand so he reworked it into another vessel? Can I not do the same with you?"

We hear it in the promise that "at one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it," building up something else of the material.

But what I witness most of all in this sending of the prophet to the potter's shed is the revealed truth that God, like a potter, isn't throwing away any clay, will instead continue to work the clay until it's worthy of God's good purpose. Judgment without condemnation: judgment with instead further confirmation of the original promise: "You're mine and I'm not letting you go, I'm not giving up on you, I'm not throwing you away. Rather, I will knead you and flatten you and cut you into pieces; I will work you and shape you and pound you and mold you." It's certainly not a painless process from our perspective, but it's also not a punitive one. It's not pain for pain's sake, violent, masochistic, humiliating, punishing. It's not eternal torment as if God were some monster. It's redemption.

It's redemption — a re-deeming, a reevaluating, a look again at what might be garbage to some lesser god or amidst some other inter-human relationship or in one's own self-estimation, a look again to see, "I still love you and I'm not letting you go."

Our email exchange has continued, but it's coming to an end.

It seems clear to me that she regards the Bible as the only reliable source of revelation in our lives, which the Evangelical and Fundamentalist wings of the church believe. In fact, she wrote a lot of the biblical God but she never wrote once of her experience of God. I, on the other hand, adhere to the historic Protestant confession that there are four sources of revelation — scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. But I broaden this list even more to include scripture; tradition and history; reason, imagination, and creation; and personal and communal experience. This is to say that, just because something is said in the Bible, doesn't mean it's God's absolute truth. You hold such things in the light of other sources of revelation. You hold any biblical assertion also in the light of tradition and reason and experience.

I imagine with that her doubt in me grows beyond overcoming.

Where my doubt in her grows beyond overcoming is in her assertion of “capital-J judgment,” a “violent judgment of the wicked.” I’ll be clear, any claim that God uses violence to save us from our violence is blasphemous to my hearing and to my faith. It’s not Christian. It’s not of the cross.

But here’s the thing: I survived. This most intimidating thing, judgment because of my proclamation of the gospel: I survived it. And, yes, if it was a cross, then it was fairly easy one. She was polite, after all; it was *email* for goodness’ sake. But I was faithful, which wasn’t necessarily to be the case. I could have chosen a path of neurotic dissembling. That’s always an option I’m willing to exercise.

So here’s the other thing: while Christ’s thinning of the crowd was about having courage in his convictions, my preferring a thinned out crowd is about cowardice. I’m afraid. I’m afraid of being judged and condemned by other people. I’m especially afraid of such things done in the name of God.

Maybe you are too, so maybe we’re all here hiding out to some degree. But we can’t hide out forever. At some point, we have to live our faith out loud. So I’m here to tell you, it can withstand testing. It’s stronger and more enduring and truer than you might think. God has been working us, will continue to work us. If we’re not the vessel yet we mean to be, we’re getting there. We’re getting there.

Thanks be to God.