

Sermon - February 13, 2022

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There are so many things I could and would say about today's readings, especially from Paul and Luke. If you read the all-too-long email I sent out for "Christian Formation" this week, you've seen only a small portion of them! And so much of that I wanted to bring into this pulpit today, to share with you the things that years of study of these two authors have opened to me.

But that isn't what I needed to preach today. Not the message that dogged me all week until I finally got up at 4 in the morning on Friday to try to put it into words.

Because this message isn't about Paul or Luke as authors. It's about the Author that lies behind them. The One whose heart for you and for me lies behind every word in that book we call the Bible.

And we have to get straight the nature and identity of that One if we're ever to have a hope of hearing what He, or She, is trying to say. It isn't enough to read the words and do our best to interpret them according to our own accumulated wisdom, no matter how great that might be. If we read them without knowing the Voice that speaks them, we will read them wrongly, we will ascribe to them meaning and intention that isn't there, and it will, in the end, reinforce that which is most broken in us, and bring us harm, not good.

It's like the way that we have become accustomed to using emojis or little acronyms in our emails and text messages to be sure that the reader understands when we're not being too serious, using a semicolon and a closed parenthesis to suggest a wink, or adding "jk"

at the end of a sentence to make sure that the reader knows we're "just kidding." If the reader doesn't know us intimately, or at least very well, they may misread our words without these aids.

There are no emojis in the Bible. We cannot read it and hear what is said accurately without some intimacy with the Author, and I don't mean the human whose pen was the instrument that put ink to papyrus.

Let me explain why I'm so set on this idea this week.

In today's reading from Luke we have what some call Luke's version of the beatitudes, followed immediately by a set of "woes." How we hear those woes depends entirely on Who it is we think is speaking them.

Yes, I know, Jesus is saying them aloud, but on whose behalf? And why?

Many too many Christians read these words and hear condemnation. Others, perhaps less inclined to judgementalism, hear simple warning. Too few hear heartbreak.

Those different readings are all the result of the degree of intimacy we have or lack with the One whose Voice we hear.

In First Corinthians Paul spoke of it as reading with a veil over our faces, or having the veil taken away by our knowledge of, intimacy with Christ. Without that intimacy, everything we read, everything we hear is distorted.

If our image of the Author of Scripture is the proverbial cop in the sky, or some ancient judge presiding over a heavenly courtroom, we hear Judgment.

“Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation!

“Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry!

“Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep!

“Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets!”

There’s an emoji for that. It uses the right pointing arrowhead before you do the colon for eyes, then a closed parenthesis for a downturned mouth. The arrowhead looks like frowny eyebrows.

I hear that voice and it thunders at me over a hand with one finger extended, pointing right at my heart. “This is what you’ve got coming!” it bellows.

But perhaps I’m more enlightened than that. Perhaps I have rejected that judgment in favor of forgiveness. I may not have intimacy with God in Jesus, but I know better than to read it so harshly.

So what voice do I hear when I read these woes? Maybe simple warning. “Look, Jeff, this is just how it is. If you have a lot, you’re going to lose it at some point. If you’re wildly well liked, folks will turn on you at some point, it’s just the way things are.”

I have to admit, that seems to be miles better than the angry voice of the first set of woes.

But it isn't enough. At least, it's not what I hope for you, and even for myself.

Because it still lacks compassion. Com - passion, suffering with.

The more I struggled to find an image for the speaker of these words, the more I was inexorably drawn to the image of a grandmother, sitting in her rocking chair on the front porch of her old house, speaking to her younger grandchildren with tears in her eyes as she saw in her mind's eye the older grandkids who weren't there to listen, who hadn't listened to her in years past, and who were buried under mountains of loss as a result.

I can just see the tears welling up, her voice breaking as she speaks.

"Ohhhh, children. You may not see it, but there's a blessing in having nothing to lose.

My dear ones, don't you go gettin' your hearts set on accumulatin' a lot of STUFF! Stuff won't hold you up when the dark days come. But if you've been poor, you've learned to lean on the One who won't EVER let you down. You hear me? Don't go down that path. There's heartbreak there, and I know it. I been there, and I don't ever want to have to think about you wakin' that path, too!"

Now there's a voice I can trust. There's a voice I can follow

It matter who it is that you hear speaking.

And the only Speaker that's true, the only Speaker worthy of your trust is the Speaker who said, as He hung from the Cross, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." The Speaker whose compassion for His mother in those moments before His death that He

ministered to her in His pain, entrusting her to His most beloved disciple, “Mother, behold your son, son, behold your mother.”

This is the voice I have to get into my head each time I sit down to read the Scriptures.

It’s why I teach new believers to start the Bible with the Gospels, preferably John. Get to know the One revealed there so that you can read everything else in the Book with His voice.

Sit down to read, and before you read, ask Holy Spirit to grant you ears to hear Him speaking, to clothe every word, every syllable, every letter in His wonderful, terrible love for you.

Gaze on that love, nailed to the Cross and see the heart poured out for you. It is that same heart poured out for you and for me on the pages of that Book. That amazing, heartbreaking, healing, terrifying, exalting Book.

Read it as an expression of that heart.

Amen.