

“Have No Fear”

Matthew 28:16-20

June 22, 2014

2nd Sunday After Pentecost

Legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, Vince Lombardi, once said to his players, “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.” I believe that his point was that, when a player became physically exhausted, he could no longer successfully do what a football player is supposed to do. In fact, fatigue would make him afraid to even try.

I think we could tweak Coach Lombardi’s quote just slightly to capture the gist of what Jesus is saying in our Gospel reading for today to say, “Suffering makes cowards of us all.” When we are suffering – physically, emotionally, or mentally – for the sake of Christ, we can no longer do the things a disciple of Jesus Christ is supposed to do. In fact, suffering can make us afraid to do those things and may cause us to fall away from Jesus.

You might be surprised that we begin the second half of the Church Year today by talking about suffering in the life of a Christian. It’s such a negative topic. Besides, many people think that being a Christian should not involve suffering. There are many preachers that will tell you that being a Christian should mean feeling happy and never sad or depressed. You should not have pain or problems. Nothing should go wrong in your life. You should always be healthy, always be wealthy, and always have the desires of your heart if you just have enough faith. If that’s not happening, you must not have enough faith.

When Christians band together to form congregations, people think the same thing should happen. Churches should never have problems, but always be successful. There should always be plenty of people in the pews and plenty of cash in the coffers. When the Gospel is shared in the community, people should joyfully believe it and immediately inquire as to how they can become members of such a positive and problem free community.

Not only does experience tell us that this pipe dream isn't true, but Jesus' own words tell us it isn't true. In our Gospel for today, Jesus tells His disciples that they can expect to be hated for the sake of His name, not loved; that their message will be rejected, not accepted; and that they will be persecuted, not welcomed.

We see the exact same thing happening today to the Christian Church as a whole; to Christian congregations in general; and to individual Christians in particular. The Word of God is hated today because it criticizes and condemns many activities which our society promotes and praises. The Gospel of Jesus Christ – the full and free forgiveness of all sin for the sake of the perfect life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection from the dead of Jesus – is rejected by modern man either because he rejects the concept of sin in favor of inappropriate choices which denies the existence of forgiveness or because he rejects the need for forgiveness, choosing to believe that God is a loving God who loves everyone and never holds anything against anyone.

You and I are hated and mocked for teaching, believing, and advocating the Word of God, especially when it conflicts with society's standards for behavior. You and I are being persecuted for preaching and promoting the Law and the Gospel. The persecution is subtle now. Some want to replace our "freedom of religion" with "freedom of worship." This means we would be free to believe, teach, and worship however we wanted – as long as we keep it within the four walls of the church. We are being told not to bring our beliefs to the public squares.

Christians see this suffering and think something is wrong. Church bodies will change the teaching of the Word of God so the "cool kids" in society will like them. The Presbyterian Church USA became the most recent church to come out in favor of same sex marriage this week. Some Christians will leave churches that refuse to compromise on the Gospel, either for a church that suits their beliefs or, more sadly, for nothing at all. They join the fastest rising demographic in religious poles – the "Nones" – those who have no religious preferences.

What does Jesus have to say about all of this in our text? “Jesus does not banish his [people’s] fear by promising that he will keep them from suffering; to the contrary, those who are most faithful to him likely will suffer most.” (Gibbs, p.528) That seems so unfair. One should be loved for being faithful, not hated; praised, not condemned; accepted lovingly, not rejected harshly. Why does this happen?

Jesus answers very clearly. There’s a certain fairness in His teaching. He says, “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.” In other words, a disciple is not more important than his teacher. A servant should not expect better treatment than his master.

Think of how Jesus was treated. Jesus gathered few disciples – not a very big congregation. His teaching was largely rejected because it was too difficult or condemned because it was deemed to be heretical. Jesus Himself was persecuted, rejected, condemned and killed on a cross. All this He willingly and lovingly did that so that your sin would be forgiven, you would be brought into a right relationship with God, and, by His bodily resurrection, you would be assured of your own resurrection from the dead and a glorious life that lasts forever in His presence.

As His students and as His servants who merely bring that message of love, peace, and hope to the world, why should we expect any different treatment? We are not above our teacher and our master. As Jesus said of us, “It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master.” As the devil hated the salvation which Jesus came to bring and tried to destroy Him before He could secure it, so the devil hates the message of salvation which we seek to bring to our friends, family, neighbors, and the world and will try to destroy us before we can bring it.

When we are faithful to our Lord and His Word, we will share in His sufferings. We can deal with this in one of two ways. We can be unfaithful to our Lord and His Word and easily avoid all suffering. That’s easy to do. Or, we can be faithful to our Lord and His Word and endure the suffering. That’s hard to do. No one likes to be hated, rejected, mocked or persecuted. No one

enjoys suffering. But the good news is that, in enduring suffering, Jesus comforts us and assures us that we don't have to fear while suffering.

First of all, we don't have to fear our opponents for their mockery of our message and their rejection of God's Word. They may seem to have the upper hand now as they control the courts, legislatures, and media of our land. But there is a new day coming. Jesus says, "So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops." The reign of God which is among us now and seen only by the eyes of faith will one day be brought out into the open and seen by all. On that day, we will be vindicated.

Secondly, we don't have to fear our opponents' power. Often, we cower before those who oppose God and His truth and are afraid of how they can hurt us. We change our doctrine and change our behavior so bad things won't happen to us. We are so afraid. Jesus says, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." The absolute worst our opponents can do, will not destroy our relationship with God nor deprive us of the really important and lasting things which God has for us. As Luther said in *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, "And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife, though these all be gone, Our vict'ry has been won; The Kingdom ours remaineth."

If you are going to fear anyone, Jesus says, you should fear God. Jesus says, "Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Why alter your beliefs and behavior to appease or fit in with those who cannot truly hurt you at the expense of opposing the only one who can hurt you? Christians who reject or alter the Word of God or live in opposition to or apathy of it are in grave danger and they should be afraid. One commentator put it this way, "Far better to be rejected and killed by enemies who themselves are mortal than to find that, because of your unbelief and apostasy, the Father has become your eternal enemy when you are raised on the Last Day and sentenced to eternal judgment in [hell]." (Gibbs, p.529)

Thirdly, we don't have to live in fear during times of suffering because we are never away from our Father's love and care. One of the greatest fears in suffering for the sake of Christ is that you are doing it all alone. You feel God has forgotten you or abandoned you. Jesus says that this is most definitely NOT the case. He says, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows." You are not alone. God does not forget you or abandon you in your suffering for His sake. If God is aware of everything that happens to a sparrow that is sold for pocket change, He is surely intimately aware of every little thing happening to you. "Does this mean that evil will not befall Jesus' disciples? No. Rather it means that when difficulties or persecutions or even martyrdom comes, the disciples are still under the Father's loving care, and it means that he is with them even when they are suffering and dying." (Gibbs, p.531)

So, as followers of Jesus Christ, boldly and faithfully confess Him by what you believe and by how you live, knowing that He will confess you as belonging to Him before His Father in heaven. But remember that if we deny Jesus by what we believe and how we live, He will deny us before His Father in heaven. This is not easy stuff here. I wish I could promise you, as some preachers do, a life free from suffering because you are a Christian, but I cannot. But I can promise you this: although you will have suffering, you need not have fear. We and the message we proclaim and live by will be vindicated. Our opponents cannot disrupt our relationship with God, nor permanently hurt us. Our loving God who redeemed us by the suffering of His Son will be with us and preserve us in our suffering because we do belong to Him, now and forever. So, have suffering, but have no fear! Amen.