

The Third Sunday after Pentecost C 2022
June 26, 2022
Luke 9:51-62 and Galatians 5:1, 13-25
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

I want to tell you right up front that today's sermon comes with both a content warning, a disclaimer, an open invitation, and a brief explanation. The content warning: I will address the scorching hot topic of abortion, though not in a way you might expect. The disclaimer: I cannot and will not be put into any of the usual "boxes" in regard to this very complex and multi-layered topic. The invitation: If you have questions or comments, please come and talk to me directly. We can sit down and have a real conversation over coffee or tea or whatever! The brief explanation: To paraphrase our old friend, Martin Luther, "here I stand," right smack in the middle of all the messy human complexity of this broken and beautiful world God so loves and longs to heal. As a called and ordained minister of Word and Sacrament in Christ's church, I am obligated to "speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, calling for justice and proclaiming God's love for the world." (See ELCA Constitution 7.31.02.) So, after much prayer and pondering, I've discerned that I must address this most complex and polarizing of topics at the of risk being misunderstood, rejected, or even "burned." I do so for the sake of the gospel of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who freely offers boundless forgiveness, grace, and new life to all people.

This has been a challenging week, and I've been doing a lot of praying and pondering. I suspect many of you have been doing the same.... I wonder: Why is it that we human beings are so eager to control other people – especially people who are different from us or who think differently than we do? Why is it that we cannot even listen to those who challenge our point of view, but instead feel moved to discredit, disparage, and wish them harm, while doubling down on our own position? I mean, how dare they disagree with us!... And why is it that some of us even go so far as to seek to inflict pain and destruction on those who are different and on those who hold views that are different from ours?

In addition to pondering, I've also been grieving this week. I'm grieving the fact that this phenomenon of seeking to control, dismiss, and destroy others is nothing new. It seems that even those of us who profess to be followers of Jesus have fallen short in learning the lessons of forgiveness, patience, and gentleness our Lord models and seeks to instill.

Traveling back 2000 years to the setting of today's gospel reading, we see that human nature hasn't changed much. James and John are deeply offended when a Samaritan village turns Jesus away and refuses to provide hospitality to their group. How dare "those people" – those "inferior" Samaritans! -- turn Jesus and them away?! James and John are so angry they want to bring fire down on the village – fire that will consume all the people who live there. Imagine how disappointed and perplexed they must've been to hear Jesus say, "No, I won't let you burn it all down!..." You may recall that prior to this episode Jesus has already been teaching his disciples that rejection is a given for those who follow in his way. For example, in Luke 6, which parallels

the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, "'Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.'" In other words, Jesus tells his friends right up front, "If you're true to me, this is how it's going to be. People will hate you. They'll reject you. They'll do everything they can to discredit or even destroy you...." Hmm...this reminds me of the first time I got hate mail for taking the position that the church must welcome LGBTQ folks as full participants in the Body of Christ. I was stunned and a little shaken at receiving such a letter, but a friend from another congregation helped me put things in perspective. "Congratulations!," she said. "You got your first hate mail. That shows you're doing this 'speaking out for justice'-thing right!..."

As I think about what Jesus says in today's gospel reading and elsewhere, I realize that my friend is right: In this world, those who speak up on behalf of the poor and oppressed are far less likely to receive kudos for their efforts and far more likely to reap what Jesus calls "a prophet's reward" – namely, vilification, death threats, or even death itself!... I want to give you one more example of a time when Jesus warns his disciples about the rejection they'll face. In Luke 9:5, when Jesus sends the twelve out to heal and proclaim the good news of the Kingdom, he tells them, "If the people in any given place won't welcome you, just shake the dust from your feet and move on...." To sum up, if you and I are true to our calling as disciples of Jesus, we're going to face rejection somewhere along the way, and such rejection will inevitably cause hurt feelings. There's no question about that! There is, however, a question about how the disciples of Jesus will respond to the rejection that unleashes hurt feelings, and that's one of the things Jesus addresses in today's reading from Luke 9.... When Jesus reprimands James and John, he's reminding all his followers that God's call is "to bring life, not death — even to those who reject and insult us. The call is to practice forgiveness and forbearance, never retribution and revenge. The call is to face each other gently and with great patience, because even the people who make our blood boil are precious to God..."¹ Wow. "Even the people who make our blood boil?... Really, Jesus? I mean, I know you told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, but that's a really hard truth to digest. [Sigh.] Well, okay, if you say so, but I'm going to need a lot of help with this one!"

I'm going to need a lot of help because my blood is boiling right now. My blood boils and my heart breaks when I think about the power plays and manipulation that have effectively laid a yoke of slavery on women and girls who are already vulnerable and hurting.... As a follower of Jesus, who is always quick to welcome and show compassion for those who are vulnerable and hurting, I feel called to walk with others in their pain, offering them a lifeline of love and support, rather than standing apart and judging them. So, over the course of my adult years, in my role as a pastor, and in my role as a friend, I've walked with several women who've agonized over having an abortion. And I can tell you that no matter what their decision, it was and always is a very complicated, personal, and agonizing decision. And I can also tell you that no matter what decision a girl or woman makes, they're going to need a lot of ongoing love and support.... I remember the healthy seventeen-year-old who chose to have her baby and then keep it, despite others urging her to give the child up for adoption. There was also the mother of a three-year-

¹ Debie Thomas, "Truth in Advertising," www.journeywithjesus.net, 23 June 2019.

old, who was devastated when she and her husband learned mid-pregnancy that their second child had severe brain and spinal deformities. After much prayer and discernment, they made the heart-wrenching decision to terminate the pregnancy because continuing it would've brought greater suffering to the child and a potential threat to the mother's life. I also remember the mother of two who was "over the moon" to learn she was pregnant with her third child, only to be utterly devastated and scared out of her wits when she found out it was an ectopic pregnancy that could burst her fallopian tube and cause her to die. She had no choice but to terminate that pregnancy.... And finally, I want share with you the perspective of a woman I know who grew up in South Africa and told me about poor black mothers she'd known were unable to feed another child; in their desperation, they felt compelled to seek illegal, "back-alley" abortions, which all-too-often resulted in grave injury or death. My heart breaks for these women and girls, and my blood boils at the injustice of a system that allows the mistresses of wealthy and powerful men to access safe abortion, while poor women – who, by the way, are predominately women of color – are denied access to safe medical procedures due to lack of resources.

Closer to home, my heart also breaks for women who will now be forced to carry the children of their rapists and abusers. And my blood boils when I think about twelve-year-old girls who will now have to bear children conceived during incest. Imagine, if you can, the lifelong pain and trauma these women and girls – and their children -- will carry. I'm sure God's heart is also breaking to see so many of God's beloved children carrying such heavy burdens When I think about the fact that some women and girls will die because they're forced to carry life-threatening pregnancies, and when I consider that those survive childbirth will carry the afterbirth of shame their whole life long, I confess that part of me totally "gets" why James and John want to call down fire and burn it all down!...

Yet even though I know how it feels to be angry to the point of wanting retribution, as a follower of Jesus I choose to channel my anger NOT toward destructive action, but rather toward constructive action – that is, toward action that seeks justice and healing for those who've had the yoke of injustice laid on their necks.... Some of you may have noticed that I just used the word "yoke" for the second time when I mentioned the "yoke of injustice." A bit earlier in this sermon, I called it a "yoke of slavery." So, here I want to point out that my use of the word points to today's text from Galatians, where Paul refers to a "yoke of slavery." This reference is part of a pointed reminder the gives to the church in Galatia, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." So, what does Paul mean here when he speaks of a "yoke of slavery?" In order to discern this, we need to look at Galatians 5:2-12, eleven verses which have been cut out of the middle of today's reading! Here we learn that the Galatian church is engaged in a heated debate that pertains to guess what -- men's bodies! Specifically, the debate has to do with whether Gentile men need to be circumcised in order to be members of the church in good standing. Apparently, powerful teachers within the Galatian church are insisting that circumcision should be made mandatory. But Paul is clearly livid about this, declaring circumcision to be an unnecessary burden for Gentile believers. In fact, he's so exasperated that in verse 12 he tells the Galatians, "I wish those who unsettle you would castrate

themselves!...” Ouch! I have to say that here Paul sounds more like James and John and not so much like Jesus!

But I want to circle back to what Paul says about freedom because his teaching on this subject is very much in line with Jesus’ call to discipleship. Paul writes, “For freedom Christ has set you free.” Since you are Christians of the “Lutheran flavor,” you should also know that five hundred years ago, Martin Luther piggybacked on this concept when he wrote his treatise “On the Freedom of a Christian.” Luther described the paradox of Christian freedom in this way:

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is [at the same time] a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

In other words, those of us who are privileged to have received the freedom Christ gives are called to use our freedom in acts of service that help to set our neighbors free from the yokes that are weighing them down. For example, if you and I truly want fewer abortions, we must use our God-given gift of freedom to help women succeed, to help them receive the health care they need and raise their children free from poverty.... Just as circumcision would not produce the fruitful outcome desired by the Galatian church, so compulsive birth without ongoing post-birth support will never lead to the faithful outcome we seek.

To sum up, in today’s readings Jesus and Paul both teach that when we as Christians try to get our ideas across by force that compels other people, we’re following the ways of the world – NOT the ways of God revealed through Jesus Christ. As followers of Jesus, you and I are called to reject the ways of force and vengeance; instead, we are to bear the fruit of the Spirit, which gives life to our neighbors and draws them irresistibly toward the light of Christ. Writer Madeleine L’Engle says it more eloquently than I ever could. She writes, “We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.

My friends, as you and I leave this sanctuary to go back out into the world, let’s shine our little lights and reflect the light of Christ all around the neighborhood, so that all who are sitting in the darkness of rejection, pain, and oppression may come to know Christ and the life that is in him. Amen.