

Yr. C, Lent 2
March 17, 2019
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1437 Words

Lessons: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35

How do you *trust* people with whom you disagree? “Some Pharisees said to Jesus, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’” Do you think they were telling the truth or was it ‘fake news?’ We don’t have any way of knowing what their motivation was. Maybe deep down they liked their sparring partner, Jesus, and wanted to protect him. Maybe they were just sick of listening to him and wanted him to leave town right away.

We *do* know this. Their story was plausible. This was not Jesus’ first scrape with the authorities. Herod the Great went on a ruthless killing spree, murdering all the holy innocents in and around Bethlehem in an attempt to protect his supremacy. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus became refugees in order to survive.

And now the son of Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, supposedly wants to kill Jesus. Herod Antipas has already beheaded Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist. And that happened for no better reason than an infatuation and an illicit affair. Truth-tellers, like John the Baptist, have to be careful when they talk about tyrants. Tyrants *never* trust people with whom *they* disagree. They just persecute them.

We know that Jesus is a truth-teller, just like his cousin, John. In the last few verses leading up to this Gospel lesson Jesus shouted down the religious authorities as hypocrites. They were indignant that he broke the Sabbath Law...in the *synagogue*, no less. Well, in that moment Jesus reveals—clearly—that he values people in need *more* than he values what the authorities might think of him.

Kim and I went to a public hearing on Thursday night. Romantic, huh? The S.C. Public Service Commission was in town to hear what we all think about a proposed 300% increase in the base price we pay Duke Energy each month before we so much as turn on a light switch. I used to go to a lot of public hearings when I was a lobbyist. I’m afraid I don’t go to enough public hearings as a priest.

Well, here’s the thing: I get a lot of phone calls from people desperate for help in paying their power bills. It’s one of the ways Jesus keeps me in touch with the *dis*-ease in our economy. Since we cannot give help to everybody who needs it, I figured the least I could do was go to this public hearing and register my disapproval for the fee increase. I have this stubborn belief that regressive taxes and fees are *always* immoral. It is a belief derived straight from my belief in Jesus Christ, and in all that he stood for.

So let’s look back and hear what Jesus says next. He has so much sass! Just like his cousin, John; Jesus is *not afraid* to speak truth to power. Jesus says, “(You can) go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I’m (busy) casting out demons and performing cures (for people in need.)’” Don’t you just *love him*?! One of the things I love about Jesus is that he cares *more* about people-in-need than he does about people in authority.

At Thursday night’s hearing the Council Chambers were packed with people. The enormous lobby was also packed, with people spilling out onto the patio. Black, White, Hispanic; old and young; disabled and infirm—altogether. It is a lovely thing to see democracy at work. And we should remember that Jesus did not have that privilege.

Kim and I signed in, and then squeezed into an open space in the lobby. We never made it into the chambers where the commissioners sat, but fortunately a speaker was set up so all the people in the lobby could hear.

Someone came to the microphone to speak. His name sounded familiar to me. I knew him when I was a lobbyist in the S.C. State House. He and I used to *disagree* about things. How do you trust someone with whom you disagree?

Although he, himself, is not poor; he spoke passionately on behalf of the poor on Thursday night. And they appreciated it. You could tell by how loudly they clapped and cheered. “Do you know what they paid the CEO of Duke Energy (in 2017)?” he asked the commissioners. “\$411,538 per *week*...that’s \$21.4 million in a year!¹ They can afford to pay that kind of money,” he shouted, “and yet they want 300% more from the poor.”

My old sparring partner was kind of grand standing just like he used to do back in Columbia. But I had to smile. At least he stood up to speak out for somebody besides himself. I have to admit that he showed he cared more about people in need than about people in authority.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus personifies for us the strength and courage described by the Psalmist: “The Lord is my light...whom then shall I fear? The Lord (God Almighty) is the strength of *my life*; of whom then shall I be afraid.”

It is crystal clear that Jesus was not afraid of Herod Antipas. Jesus was not going to allow his mission of mercy for people in need to be impeded whatsoever. Despite this very real threat of violence from Herod Antipas, Jesus was unswerving in his devotion to the people in need.

Everybody in Galilee knew not only *what* Jesus stood for, but also *who* he stood up for...because Jesus always stands up for people in need. Jesus always speaks out for people in need. Jesus always cares *more* about people in need than about people in authority.

The good news of today’s Gospel is that we can always count on Jesus’ compassion and mercy when we are people in need—all the times when we are weak or vulnerable.

The *challenging* news of today’s Gospel is that we are always invited to join with Jesus in standing up and speaking out when we are people with power—all the times when we are fortunate to have strength and courage.

The *best* news of today’s Gospel is the clarity with which Jesus reveals his compassion for—and devotion to—*all* of God’s children.

You see, even though Jerusalem was a place of violence and danger for truth-telling prophets like Jesus, he sets his face like flint² to go there on his ultimate mission of mercy. Jesus goes there because he cares more about people in need (including you and me) than he does about people in authority (like Pontius Pilate).

And with a breaking heart, Jesus reveals his deepest desire. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often have I desired to gather your children *together*...as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

If you and I had been among the Pharisees who were talking to Jesus that day, I don’t think we would ever forget the strength, courage, and compassion that he revealed in thought...word...and deed.

¹ His comments align with reporting by *The Charlotte Observer* (March 9, 2018) disclosing the most recently available compensation data for the C.E.O. of Duke Energy.

² We are reminded of this prophesy from Isaiah every year on Palm Sunday when we celebrate Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem.

So, how *do you* trust someone with whom you disagree? You watch and listen for thoughts, words, and deeds of compassion for people in need—people who are weak and vulnerable, people who are sick or suffering, people who are poor or oppressed, and people who are mourning.

In this violent, dangerous, crooked, greedy world we live in, the Church has an incredible opportunity to join *with Jesus* in his mission of compassion. Those who seek supremacy are following in the way of Herod the Great or Herod Antipas or Pontius Pilate. Those who seek to serve and to love are following in the way of Jesus.

Even our little congregation of St. Peter's has many different opportunities to show the way of Jesus, the way of love. When you and I seek and serve Christ in others...when we reach forth our hands in love, we become part of Jesus' mission of mercy to people in need. We also open our hearts to Jesus' deepest desire...of gathering all of God's children together, like a hen gathers her brood.

People with whom we disagree—including people of other faiths and people of no faith—they are watching and listening to see and hear if they can trust the followers of Jesus.

And I want to say how thankful I am and how proud I am of the strong heartbeat of service for people in need that I see lived out by the people of St. Peter's.

May the Church always reveal the heart of Christ, which is big and open and courageous. May the Church always reveal the Body of Christ, which is broken *and* strong and devoted. May the Church always reveal the Spirit of Christ, unswerving with compassion and mercy for people in need.

Amen.