

“Living with Faith, Hope, and Love on the edge of the Cliff”
 Jeremiah 1:4-10 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 Luke 4:21-30

A story is told about a travelling teacher who travelled in a horse drawn carriage, and he travelled so much that he had become very good friends with his coachman. One day the coach driver said to him, “You know, I have driven you to so many speeches. You say very beautiful things, but you say the same beautiful things every time each place you go. Not only that, but when people ask you questions they always seem to ask you the same three or four questions, and you always give them the same answer. I actually know your speech by heart.

I had an idea. Perhaps the next time we go to a new place where they don’t recognize you, we could change clothes and I could be the teacher and you could be the coachman. I want to see what the world looks like from the eyes of a master teacher. And who knows? Maybe I shouldn’t spend the rest of my life as a coachman after all?

The teacher thought this was a great idea, could be lots of fun and so they tried it the very next week. Dressed as the teacher, the coachman gave a very excellent rendition of the speech. Dressed as the coachman, the teacher dutifully watched the horses.

After the usual round of questions, a young boy raised his hand and asked a question that was very deep and so complex that the coachman barely understood it much less have any idea how to answer it.

He thought seriously for a minute. Then he looked up at the boy. “Your question appears to the untrained eye to be very complex,” he said. “However, it is actually very, very simple. In fact, it is so simple that even a plain coachman can answer it. I’ll show you what I mean. Let’s call him over here!”

One of the scriptures we heard this morning is probably one of the most recognized in all of the Bible. It is Paul’s extraordinarily eloquent statement on the particular love expressed by God in Jesus Christ. I have loved this passage for a long, long time, but I want to point out a couple phrases that have gained more and more significance to me, phrases that I used to kind of sluff over. They are phrases of great humility.

Verse nine says, “we know only in part, and we prophecy only in part.” And then again in verse 12 he writes, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” There is a great humility in those words. They were written by a man who had spent a great deal of energy rooting out this uppity band of renegades who called them selves disciples of Jesus Christ. He was even an accessory to murder; he had held the cloaks of the men who had stoned Stephen. Then he had been knocked off his horse by a vision of the resurrected Christ and had been transformed into the foremost apostle of the amazing grace and transforming love of God.

“We know only in part and we prophecy only in part.” I wonder. I wonder what the people of Nazareth said when they found out that the young uppity

rabbi, the hometown boy that had had the gall to come into their synagogue and take advantage of their good graces and fine hospitality by insulting them right to their face, what did they say when they found out that this young fellow had actually been the Messiah? “Lord, have mercy, we knew only in part.”

Luke is doing more than just telling us something that happened to Jesus early in his ministry. He is telling us about the humility of the community of faith. The community of faith never has an easy time of it coming to anything like a grasp of the length and breadth of God’s love for all the world. It is not just the people in Nazareth who get riled up enough to threaten to throw the prophet off the cliff.

Living by a cliff can be a lot of things, but dull or humdrum is not one of them. A couple years ago we took a trip to Colorado and one of the places we visited was Mesa Verde which has some world famous cliff dwellings built by native Americans about a thousand years ago. They are a stunning achievement and it was fascinating to hear the stories associated with the people who built this precariously perched dwellings. It appears that they were built by a very advanced ancient civilization. These peoples were very advanced in their agricultural methods. Yucca was their main crop, but the land on which they lived went through a very prolonged drought of very little rainfall. As the yield of their crops became less and less with each passing season it became more and more important for them to safeguard their storehouses so these cliff dwellings were a very ingenious way of maintaining their security. They closely guarded their storehouses as well as their knowledge of the best times to plant their crops.

We toured a couple of the cliff dwellings. They were not totally accessible even now. We had to climb up ladders to get to them. At the edge of the cliffs some retaining walls had been built. The rangers told us that these were an added feature so when the ancient pueblos had been raising their families on these precipices this was the front yard on which their children played. Talk about risky. But it was the price they were willing to pay to protect their scarce resources.

If they were attacked or if attempts were made to raid their supplies it is very clear from their dwelling locations that they would have no hesitation in throwing those who threatened them off the cliff.

Last week we were challenged by the gospel to hear the word of God speaking to us. At first, the people liked what they heard; they were amazed at the gracious way in which he spoke. Jesus could have just stopped while he was ahead, and left everyone feeling good about the hometown boy made good. We can just hear the comments, “That was a nice sermon, Rabbi.” “I enjoyed that Jesus.” “That was very interesting, Jesus.” Or “Well, you really made me think this morning, Reverend.”

Reports about Jesus’ miracles had preceded him from his time in Capernaum, so it just seems right that Jesus could heal a few people as long as he was there, maybe cast out a demon or two, you know do a little something for the hometown folks, but that is not the way this sermon goes.

Jesus seems to go out of his way to provoke these good people. Jesus tells them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb: Doctor, heal thyself."

Now I want to remind you that we are not reading a novel here; this is a gospel; this is the church's story so Luke assumes that we know this story backwards and forwards, so "Doctor, cure yourself" is more than a proverb it is the same taunt with which Jesus was ridiculed while he hung on the cross. The leaders made fun of Jesus, "He made such a big deal of saving himself, surely he ought to be able to save himself." The soldiers joined in the mocking as well, "If you are the king of the Jews, surely you ought to be able to save yourself." Even one of the thieves joined in, "Are you not the Messiah, save yourself and us!"

We are told over and over from the beginning of the gospels right through to the resurrection that the grace of God exceeds our sense of limits, God love can never be contained within our borders, God's providence can never be justification for throwing anyone over the cliff, figuratively or literally.

The gospel is always the most powerful when it is for others, and Jesus makes this very clear, actually too clear by telling two stories not designed to make friends among a proud and patriotic people.

"What do you suppose God was up to, what do you think was happening, dear friends, when back there in the days of Elijah and the great famine which hit the land, Elijah, God's prophet, was sent to a starving woman in Castro's Cuba, and this card carrying communist was the only one who got fed; she wasn't even a church member much less a US citizen." That's the equivalent of what Jesus is saying here. He is going out of his way to be outrageous.

And then he makes sure he makes matters worse by telling of Elisha, the prophet's successor where there were lots of folks with terrible sickness but God's mercy doesn't go to anyone wearing the right uniform but to this corrupt, degenerate foreign soldier. Hometown boy or not, Jesus had crossed the line. He might just as well have told these people that God is as likely to bless an Imam from Iran as a Bishop in Florida. These alarming illustrations of the universality of God's love and providence are simply not acceptable to a people whose religion has made God small enough to fit into their churches or synagogues. God's love and mercy is always larger than anything we can imagine. And sometimes our buttons have to be pushed so we can see that.

This gospel cautions us to be very, very careful with our righteous indignation and anger that gets riled up to the point where we are far too willing to hurl blame and throw "the other" off the cliff. The one who we think is a threat to us. The one who pushes our buttons. The ones who we just know deep down in our hearts are up to no good. Be very careful who you get ready to throw off the cliff – it just might be the Messiah, for we know only in part.

This God of Jesus is just too free, too inclusive, too radical to be controlled by our tastes or our needs for security. And this is the gospel that we are called to proclaim.

Soren Kierkegaard was a Danish Pastor. He noted that many great minds of his century had given themselves to making people's lives easier -- inventing

labor-saving machines and devices. He said that he would dedicate himself to making peoples lives more difficult. He would become a preacher.

So how did Jesus walk through this angry crowd that was ready to throw him off the cliff. I would suggest that he was already and always at peace within himself because the Father and he were one. He was always depending on a power greater than himself.

I saw a Walt Disney movie on television recently. It was a wonderful movie titled, Ruby Bridges. It was the story of Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old African-American girl, who was the first person to integrate the schools in New Orleans.

Every day the federal marshals escorted her into the schoolhouse because both sides of the sidewalk would be lined with people who were screaming threats. Robert Coles, a noted Harvard psychiatrist, volunteered his time to work with young Ruby. Every day he would talk with her, trying to help her weather the crisis. On the news one night, he noticed her walking up the sidewalk and the people were screaming and throwing things, but suddenly she stopped and said something and started backing down the sidewalk. Then the marshals picked her up and took her into the building. That night, Cole asked her what she said to the marshals. She said, "I was not talking to the marshals." He said, "Yes, you were. I saw you on the news. I saw your lips moving. You were talking to the marshals." She said, "I was not talking to the marshals." He said, "Well, what were you doing?" She said, "I was praying for those people who were hollering at me. I had forgotten to pray and I was trying to go back and pray for them as I walked to the school building." Cole shook his head and said, "You were praying for the people who were screaming at you?" She said, "Yes, my mama taught me that when people speak mean of you, you pray for them just like Jesus prayed for the people who spoke mean of him."

Soft is stronger than hard.

Water is stronger than rock.

Love is stronger than all violence, no matter hoe angry is the crowd, no matter how steep is the cliff.

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