

Proper 18C September 8, 2019
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Uncomfortable Words
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Directly in front of you, in the book holder on the back of the pew in front of you, there is a red book with a cross on it. Most of you, I am sure, easily recognize it. It is the Book of Common Prayer, and, in addition to the Bible, it is the primary book for those of us in the Episcopal Church. For those of you who are not familiar with this book, besides having the words for today's worship service in it, it also has prayer services for Morning, Noonday, and Evening Prayer. And a lovely end of the day service called Compline. All the psalms are in it. Go ahead, check it out. It's got services for special occasions like baptism, ordinations, confirmations, weddings, and funerals. In addition to all those services, you can find a catechism, an explanation of what we believe in the form of questions and answers toward the back of the book. There is a collection of important historical documents in our Book of Common Prayer, so you can see for yourself the documents that helped form this denomination of followers of Jesus. There is a calendar, so we can look up the future dates of Easter. There is a calendar of Bible readings for every day of the year, and a calendar of the Church Year. Lots of good stuff. And we don't keep it locked away, we put it out for everyone to read and to use.

Despite being such an important and foundational book, or maybe because it is, some of you may be surprised to learn it is also a controversial book. Because it changed in the 1970's and many remember and long for the version that came before it. The intention of the changes was in line with the original intention of the Book of Common Prayer when it was conceived back in the mid 1500's: to reflect the language of the people so that whether rich or poor, educated or not, young or old, everyone could understand the words and participate in the service. One of the changes that was made was the removal of what are called the "comfortable words". There used to be a place in the Sunday service where the priest would read some of the most comforting words Jesus said from the Gospels. Things like, "Come unto to me all ye that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."

Interestingly, there was a bishop who criticized the inclusion of *only* the comfortable words of Jesus in the service, because doing so, he believed, led to an incomplete picture of Jesus that only comforted and never challenged people.

Jesus didn't just come to bring comfort; he came to bring God's love and that doesn't always look like a hug. Love sometimes challenges us to be better than we are, to make changes, and that message doesn't always feel comforting.

And the words from today's Gospel do not seem to have any comfort in them at all. Jesus seems to be lacking in the good news and love of God we usually associate with him. In fact, Jesus seems to be talking about the opposite of love when he starts talking about hate and hating all the important people in our lives: our family. Now, there are those whose family systems can be abusive and toxic, and I want anyone listening today who may have had to leave that type of system to know you are loved and supported. For that is what is at the heart of the Gospel- love does not mean staying in abusive relationships. God's love is life-giving.

Which is why for those of us who are richly blessed with loving and supportive families the words of Jesus demanding us to hate those whom we love and have shown us live-giving love can be confusing, and maybe even upsetting. Especially if we think of hate as the opposite of love. But that may not be the case.

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry has said that he believes the opposite of love is not hate, it is selfishness. The kind of selfishness that puts self in the center of the universe and leaves no room for anyone or anything else. The kind of selfishness characterized by a false pride that is so extreme it even has a Biblical name: *hubris*. It is this kind of selfishness that does not care about others, the world we live in, or God. This kind of selfishness is at the heart of all those evils in the world: those isms that segregate and divide us based on things like age, gender, race, color, religion, and politics. By the way, there is another word for this kind of selfishness: sin.

Jesus was not telling people to sin in today's Gospel. Scholars and commentators assure us that what the author of Luke's Gospel was doing when he wrote that Jesus told the many people who were following him on the road to hate their families, he wasn't talking about the opposite of love, he was talking in a manner that can be found in the Old Testament, an extreme way of talking called hyperbole. Which isn't about the expressions of hate, especially the violent expressions of hate, it is about priorities. Scholars tell us in today's Gospel Jesus is talking to people who have seen some amazing things and heard even more wonderful things from Jesus and want to join that movement. But Jesus was not looking for groupies, and his words are about what it means to live a Christ-

centered life, one where priorities are about following Jesus, resisting selfish desires, renouncing evil, making time for prayer and study, attending and participating in worship, and respecting the dignity of every human being.

Living a Christ-centered life means people close to us like our parents might not always understand or support our choices and priorities. For example, I have told the story from my life of how my parents were opposed to the ordination of women to the priesthood, and how answering God's call to be a priest was a challenge for my parents. And for me. As I feared answering God's call and being ordained a priest would cost my relationship with my parents. But thanks be to God it didn't. Because my parents also lead a Christ-centered life, and because of their faith, they were willing to stay in relationship with me and with God through the long process we have to go through in the church to be ordained a priest. And after that process, I was ordained, and they changed. They had grown closer to God and changed their views on the ordination of women, now they are supportive. They realized their views or opinions do not matter more than God's will. And following Jesus sometimes means following Jesus through a long-held belief that is being challenged, and when you learn to keep your heart and eyes on Jesus, you can see through your own *hubris* to the glory of the love of God in Christ on the other side.

That is what is at the heart of today's Gospel. Jesus was warning or cautioning those who were expressing interest in joining him that he wasn't offering a cheap, quick, feel-good solution to the problems of life. In fact, there are times when following Jesus might lead to other problems or through uncomfortable places that challenge what we thought we knew for certain. And sometimes, like my parents, we might be asked to let go of some things that actually hold us back and prevent us from living God's Kingdom here and now.

We need to remember, the purpose of the church is to be the Body of Christ not just to each other, but to those outside our doors. And sometimes those outside our doors will have different ideas about what that should look like. That is why we need to hear all the words of Jesus, not just the comforting ones, as much as we want to bring comfort to the suffering, sometimes we need to challenge and remind the world that there is another way to live that doesn't put higher value on one person over another based on things like the family you come from, your wealth, your gender, your degree, your job or position, your race, sexual orientation, or the amount of clothing or cars or stuff you own. We need to remind people we are all God's children, loved and valued by God. We need to

be for the world an example of how human beings are not a plague on the planet, we are part of it, charged by God to care for the earth because we are responsible for its well-being and the well-being of those who come after us, because we are all connected and part of the same family of humanity.

Of course, before we remind the rest of the world of these things, we need to remember them ourselves, which is why the uncomfortable words of Jesus matter. Words that really are about love, loving God by following Jesus. And such love means learning and growing and sometimes letting go so that we can grow closer to Jesus. That's where healing happens. And hope. And resurrection life. But it isn't quick or painless or easy or cheap. Nothing of any value ever is. But it is good, in the deepest meaning of the word. Because that is how we live the resurrection life Jesus brings. Resurrection life isn't afraid to go through the pain of grief, or bigotry, or any form of selfishness which can be frightening and uncomfortable. Only the resurrection life of Christ is strong enough to bring us through to the other side of suffering and discomfort to the life-giving kingdom of God here on earth.

Today's Gospel is a reminder that although there are many things that can influence or form us, it is life-giving resurrection that forms us, like the clay on the potter's wheel from our first lesson, into a follower Jesus, wherever he leads us. So when the road gets difficult or challenging or full of problems, perhaps it is the uncomfortable words of Jesus that are the ones we need to help us remember we aren't in any difficulty alone; Jesus is with us, and always has been, and will be there with us all the way through to the resurrection life on the other side.