

Yes, We Can (by God's grace)
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 107:23-32, 39-43
Reading from the New Testament: Matthew 10:24-39

This week, I read the reviews for a couple of books I may add to the list of books I already own, or have not yet ordered, that I may never get around to reading. Do you have that stack of books, the ones that smirk at you so disapprovingly as you walk by, piercing you with guilt and feelings of inadequacy? Anyway, my pathology notwithstanding, the reviews highlighted a couple of intriguing notions that connect to the to-do list which evolves out of our text today.

Two of the books reviewed, *Why We're Polarized* by Ezra Klein and *Divided Politics, Divided Nation* by Darrell West speak to the complexities involved with navigating relationship and communication in a deeply polarized environment. That such complexities inevitably intersect with any public witness of faith certainly adds considerable stress to the effort of living as a disciple of Jesus Christ today. However, despite the passing of two millennia and the vast differences of culture and context, could it be that the stresses of public witness today are not all that different from those experienced by Christ's earliest disciples?

Darrell West taught at Brown University for twenty years before being named as the director of the Governance Studies program at the Brookings Institution, which is to say he has pretty good street cred at the corner of Academic Ave. and Brainiac Boulevard. However, West grew up on a dairy farm in small town Ohio, where his family's life revolved around their conservative Christian Church. Thus, he possesses the unique quality of understanding both poles of the great American divide: Midwest evangelical conservative and Coastal academic.

West says, "My immediate family is unusual in the breadth of its political and religious disagreements. The four siblings of my generation include an academic researcher who studies American politics, a gay brother who distrusts conservatives, and two sisters who are Christians supporting Donald Trump." West confesses, "We are about as far apart as a family could possibly be in twenty-first-century America." (Anthony Robinson, *The Christian Century*)

That said, I would counter that West's experience is not as rare as he might think. In fact, I would say West's experience is common and threatens to become the norm. How many of you would report that once

you get beyond the awkward blessing and "*Please pass the gravy*" at Thanksgiving, conversation becomes a stressful endeavor, sort of like tiptoeing through a minefield. People can go from congenial to crazed in less time than it takes to butter your Parker House roll. Just the slightest reference to a controversy, candidate, legislation, or election can launch cousin Chucklehead into that stratosphere where strokes dwell and spouses are consigned to write notes of apology. Of course, ol' Chucklehead isn't as irksome as Uncle Insufferable, the one self-appointed to grace every gathering and coopt every conversation with his irrefutable knowledge and unassailable opinions and insensitive impunity, delivered with such volume and stamina, his captured audience is left in stunned silence, not in fear, but just hoping not to trigger further fulmination and praying that next year's gathering will be held at a monastery. *Blessed be the tie that binds!*

Of course, this is nothing new. Through the centuries, wherever two or more have gathered, the polarization of conversation has waited in the wings just itching to pounce. Why, the knights of the round table probably got into a major row over an issue before Camelot's school board. My grandfather's father and my grandmother's mother refused

to be in the same room during election years. Yet, with the rise of social media and the false bravado coaxed by the Twitter feed and Facebook post, there at least seems to be a sharper, more entrenched attitude with our polarities, particularly since we're just a click away from untold "sources" that only confirm our bias.

To a group of ill-equipped, often confused disciples, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household."

Come on, Jesus! Don't be such a buzzkill. Has no one ever taken you to a Norman Rockwell exhibit? What about all those wholesome, Jesusy themes like redemption, reconciliation, mercy, and mutual affection? What you are talking about sounds more like an episode of *The Sopranos*. "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." I don't remember that ever being a theme for Vacation Bible School. What's going on here?

The scene in our text today is a continuation of the scene we talked about last week. Jesus is commissioning his disciples/apostles, and thus, the future church to go forth and carry on the ministry he has modeled for them. "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'the kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons."

That's quite a list, both intimidating and impossible. Yet, as we discussed last week, if we learn one thing from the arc of the biblical narrative, it is the principal of divine agency. God's MO, modus operandi, is to act through the ordinary to accomplish the extraordinary, to draw out the least expected person, and through them, accomplish the impossible. It is not our ability or genius, but God's providential grace that carries the story forward. Jacob, Moses, Ruth, and don't forget the shepherd boy with his slingshot. They weren't heroes. Their flaws were readily transparent, and yet through them God's promise moves forward.

However, even with the copious evidence of divine agency, Jesus wants his disciples and his future church to go forward with eyes open, understanding that the work before them is arduous and will not

always be met with applause, acclamation, and a couple of verses of Kum ba yah. There will be hard conversations, shunning, exclusion, repudiation, rejection, pain, and worse ... for such is the risk of love. Perhaps you know the haunting torch song of Billy Joel, *And So It Goes...* Someone, oft burned before is on the threshold of a new relationship that could be love, but there is fear and hesitancy in taking the risk of love. "And every time I've held a rose; It seems I only felt the thorns; And so it goes, and so it goes; And so will you soon I suppose..."

Let's be real here. It's not just in romance that hearts are stressed or broken. Hearts are often broken in the pursuit of justice or the greater good. Is it not wounded hearts that fueled the emotion in the streets in these recent weeks? The 400-year dream for racial equality deferred yet again, the hope of wholeness put off once more. Isn't it time? Isn't it time?

Hearts are also broken at work, in friendships, in the courtroom, at the ballot box, on the field, in the race, at the bank, and yes, at the kitchen table. How many kitchen tables provided the setting for tears and hard conversations and forever altered lives on December 8th or 9th in '41, or on 9/12 or 9/13 in '01 as young adults, kids actually,

revealed their call to enlist, to serve? How many kitchen tables provided the setting for tears and hard conversations in the days before March 7th, 1965, as moms and spouses and family members were informed of a loved one's intention to march in Selma?

Love lived out requires honest conversation, truth-telling, a willingness to be vulnerable, the possibility of disillusionment, disappointment, rejection, sacrifice. The work of love, as revealed in Jesus Christ, does not connote champagne wishes and caviar dreams. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer talked the talk and walked the walk of faith and love, he said, " "The cross is laid on every Christian ... Thus, it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Love, after the manner of Christ, is a life that may call one away from that which is comfortable, familiar. It is a life that may engage difficult, hard conversations, risking the fuse of conflict to be honest, speaking the truth in love, whether it's about the realities of racism and the hard work of justice; the economic inequalities that squash families and fracture communities; the calling felt by a child that would take

them into a zone of danger on the other side of the earth. It is a way of life that puts self at risk for the sake of others. It can be a dangerous, uncertain, life and death in the balance kind of path. And yet, it is the way to life. It is the way of healing. It is the way of mercy and the redemption of life.

God bless the health care workers, the bus drivers, the cooks, cleaners, and clerical army who got up and went to the hospital, the bus stop, the testing site, the triage clinic. When they stand in the hallway and at the hospital entrance, cheering and celebrating the Lazarus-like patients graduating from the ventilator to go home, you can see in the eyes of these doctors, nurses, therapists, and maintenance staff that they understand the difference between playing at life and living life into the fullness of God's love and purpose. "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Michael Lindvall tells the story of Fuad Bahnan, who by the early 1980's had served as pastor of a small Christian church in West Beirut, Lebanon for 30 years. 1983 was the year the Israeli army drove north into Lebanon. While most people didn't think they would come as far as the capital city, the members of Bahnan's church feared the army would

reach Beirut and cut off the area, hoping to starve out any Palestinian opposition, but at the same time starving the community around the church. Sensing this probability, the church arranged for the purchase of a vast amount of canned food in preparation for the siege. The siege came and West Beirut was totally cut off. No food was allowed in. The session of Pastor Bahnan's church met to organize the distribution of food. Two proposals were put forward. One would give the food first to members, and then as supplies permitted, to other Christians in the community, and finally, if there was any left, they would give it to Muslim neighbors.

The second proposal was different. And the debate began. The meeting lasted six hours. It concluded when an older, quiet, and much-respected elder - a woman - stood up, and cried out, "If we do not demonstrate the love of Christ in this place, who will?" And thus, it was the second proposal that passed, which meant the food was distributed first to Muslims, then to other Christians, and finally, to members of the congregation. In the end, there was enough for everyone. (Michael Lindvall, *A Geography of God*)

When Christ calls you, he bids you come and die. Die to self. Live in Christ. Serious times call for serious people to address serious issues; speaking the truth in love along with a willingness to be honest with themselves about their own blind spots. Now is not the time to demur. Now is the time to do ... to die with Christ, and thus, live in him. Amen.