

Do not fear

Have you ever been afraid for your life because of your faith in Jesus? The early Christ followers to whom the Epistle was written knew that sort of fear. They were boldly claiming Jesus as their Lord – making it clear that their allegiance was to Jesus alone, not the Roman governor or emperor. And for this they were at least “at the receiving end of slander and malicious talk”. It could have also been much more harsh persecution at the hands of Domitian, the cruel and paranoid Roman emperor. (Brown) Clearly, identifying oneself as a Jesus-follower in the first century brought true persecution. The kind experienced by Coptic Christians in Egypt this past Palm Sunday or those shot at the Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston as they studied the Bible together. This was the kind of fear the writer of I Peter was addressing.

The writer goes on, then, to remind the readers of the tools and resources that are available when serious persecution (even death) because of their faith is part of their reality. These are the kinds of tools that I believe MJ Sharp had developed and used daily. MJ was the Mennonite U.N. worker killed in the Democratic Republic of Congo in March. These are not necessarily tools whose purpose is to keep one alive; these tools are most useful for keeping one faithful – for helping to boldly claim one’s sole allegiance to Jesus. The writer of I Peter tells us that the tools are goodness, hopefulness, gentleness, reverence, love. We are reminded that we people of faith can defend our following Jesus with integrity, without being aggressive or mean. We can argue, but with respect and dignity for our opponents. There’s no need to be fearful or intimidated – just offer a genuine explanation for where our hope comes from. It is entirely possible that persecution will come – and when it does, we will be comforted and assured with the blessing of a clear conscience. (Nicolet-Anderson)

From I Peter, the lectionary takes us to the Gospel of John on this sixth Sunday of Easter – a full two weeks before Pentecost, but already we’re learning about our most powerful tool of all – the Advocate... the one who will be with us forever. Last week we heard the comforting words of the first part of John 14, “Do not let your hearts be troubled...” Today, we pick up right where we left off as Jesus continued his “Farewell Discourse”, which is chapters 13-17. These are Jesus’ words of goodbye to his disciples as he tried to prepare them for his imminent arrest, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. (Lewis)

What was it that the disciples most needed to hear from Jesus at that moment? It was, of course, exactly what he told them. Keep my commandments; hold tightly to what I’ve taught you. And just in the way that I’ve been your Advocate, there will be another Advocate who will come after I’m gone. This Advocate, the Greek word is Parakletos, “a term for someone who is called to one’s side as a source of help”, this Holy Spirit will be a Spirit of truth. And, in chapter 16, verse 13 we read, “When the Spirit of truth comes, it will guide you into all the truth”.

I love this word parakletos... one commentator wrote, “The word parakletos presents notorious translational difficulty because it has a range of meanings in the Greek, all of which are meant by the author. It can be translated Comforter, Advocate, Counselor, Helper; perhaps it would be best to keep it in its transliterated form, Paraclete, so as to catch the attention of the hearer with

the strangeness” of the word. “It’s best not to shut down possible meanings...The Holy Spirit is said to teach, remind, abide and testify about Jesus.” Wow! This is almost better than having Jesus himself – having this Spirit who comes alongside us and help us in all of these ways. (Clark-Soles)

Jesus tells the disciples that they KNOW the Spirit because the Spirit abides with them and will be in them. In the Gospel of John, to “know” means to be in relationship with, to abide with, to hang out with, to live and breathe, to be present with... Especially in John’s Gospel, faith, is a relationship with a living being. For there to be authentic faith in Jesus, people must be able to relate to the living Jesus – a Jesus who is not absent but present. Otherwise faith is reduced to the memory of a Jesus who died long ago.” (Koester)

This reminds me of the conversation I had 20 years ago with the Western District Conference Leadership Commission for my credentialing. One of the members observed that in my written statement of faith I didn’t mention much about my “daily walk with Jesus” – he invited me to reflect and expound on that. My response was that what I wrote about was my relationship with the Holy Spirit – the one who remains present with us.

Finally, I want to point out that “this brief but powerful passage begins and ends with Jesus’ favorite theme – love... Jesus declares in verse 15, if you love me, keep my commandments.” But what are those commandments according to the Gospel of John? “Unlike, say, Matthew, nowhere in John does Jesus command us to go the second mile, turn the other cheek, render unto Caesar. Famously, Jesus gives only a single commandment in John – and that was back in chapter 13. ‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’ (John 13:34-35) He reiterates this in the chapter just after ours: ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.’ (John 15:12-13) We see, then, the overwhelming, repetitive, circular emphasis on love. As the late William Sloan Coffin said, ‘If we fail in love, we fail in all things else.’

At the end of each day, and during each moment of each day, for John, there’s only question to ask yourself: ‘In what ways did I or did I not love today?’” (Clark-Soles)

It’s easy to imagine the disciples’ confusion, anxiety and fear as they tried to take in what Jesus was telling them. 2,000 years later it’s easy for us, still, to experience that same confusion, anxiety and fear. But if we choose to participate with the God who makes a home in us, whose Spirit abides with and in us, then there is no need to fear, but simply to live boldly and humbly, claiming our allegiance to Jesus and using the tools of godness, hopefulness, gentleness, reverence and love.

Resources:

Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, pages 484-495

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=938, Valerie Nicolet-Anderson, Commentary on I Peter 3

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3239, Jeannine K. Brown, Commentary on I Peter 3

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1995, Karoline Lewis, Commentary on John 14

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=69, Jaime Clark-Soles, Commentary on John 14

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=934, Craig R. Koester, Commentary on John 14