

Left Behind...to Witness!

May 22, 2011

John 14:1-14

14:1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

14:2 In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

14:3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also

14:4 And you know the way to the place where I am going."

14:5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

14:7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

14:8 Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."

14:9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?

14:10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

14:11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

14:12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

14:13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

14:14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

Acts 7:55-60

7:55 But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

7:56 "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

7:57 But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him.

7:58 Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

7:59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

7:60 Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

8And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. ²Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. ³But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.

Proclamation of the Word

With the end of the world predicted to have happened yesterday, I guess we are all the ones left behind. But we are left as were the apostles in the book of Acts with a mission and a witness.

Have you seen the bumper sticker,

"In case of Rapture, this car will be un-manned."

I prefer the reply on another bumper sticker,
“In case of Rapture, can I have your car?”

While signs point that there is much in the world that points to destruction, Christians are people who believe that the Lord of all the Universe only knows the time of Christ’s coming again. All our times are in God’s hands as the Psalm of the day reminds us. And even in the difficult days we trust in God who is a rock and our fortress.

I think there is something more pressing than the Apocalypse is that we are living in an earthquake-like time of seismic change. While people throughout all ages, including the church of the book of Acts, have experienced big changes, we live in a particular time of big shifts. Some people react to this kind of change by making predictions about the end of the world as we know it. Others hunker down and pray for day light. Still others pick up stones and hurl them at each other in violence.

In our Scripture reading today , we find the people of faith in an all out conflict. It’s the Hebrews against the Hellenists. We might say that this was the first split in the church. It’s a story that repeats itself over and over throughout time. The Catholics vs. Protestants, the Roman Church vs. the Eastern Orthodox Church, Palestinian vs. Israeli, the Jets and Sharks, the Bloods and the Crips, us and them, in and out. Human nature sometimes shows its sinful side, and divides into factions.

The Hebrew followers of Jesus those we know are ethnically Jewish are in conflict with the Hellenists, the Greek-speaking followers of Jesus. The presenting problem is practical. The Hellenists widows are not getting served and fed down at the Community Center in proportion to the Hebrew widows. So the Apostles ask the people to elect 7 men in good standing, full of the Spirit and wisdom. After the congregational meeting, the Apostles laid hands upon them and prayed over them. That day Stephen and 6 others were ordained as deacons to serve those in need, including the poor widows. Stephen full of grace and power did many wonders and signs among the people the Bible says. Some of the members of the Freedmen church picked a fight with him. They take issue with his wisdom and spirit, so they trump up charges and have him accused saying, “we have heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth would destroy this place and change the customs of Moses.” Wow, talk about seismic change. Turmoil ensues and people did not like what they were seeing. In this conflict we witness the turning point of the mission of God in the book of Acts. The Temple and Torah faith in God was crumbling. And people were anxious. It was too much change. It was the end of the world as they knew it. That kind of ending brings feelings of real grief and real loss. The people who were loyal to a Hebraic practice of faith were being pushed, and they did not like the changes they saw. Incidentally, this is the last time the apostles try to have a revival, an evangelistic program in Jerusalem. They move on and out into other territory with the gospel mission. Now lest we stand in judgment, we Presbyterians know something about this fear of change and loss.

You’ve heard the joke...

How many Presbyterians does it take to change a lightbulb? CHANGE???????? We laugh because it is true...

So back to Stephen...Stephen goes to preaching....Stephen, full of grace and power, witnesses to the God who through Abraham, Joseph and Moses led them in faith. He recounts that God gave them up to worship false gods and called them back through prophets. He recounts that God does not dwell in houses built by human hands. The transcendent God of the Universe has heaven for a throne and earth as a footstool. And then he goes to meddling by pointing the finger and accusing them of denying the lordship of Jesus the Messiah, betraying him and murdering him. Then it happens. They snap. They become enraged and grind their teeth at

him. Stephen has a vision of God and heaven. He asks God to forgive them even as they hurl stones at him to kill him.

I want to be the hero-who courageously steps out in faith to stand up and proclaim what is true and right. In fact, I have committed my life to that. Most of us want to be the Stephen filled with the Holy Spirit in this story.

But what if I am more like the Hebrew who love the Torah and Temple with all my heart even above God Almighty? What if in the name of good religion, I am willing to pick up a stone, grind my teeth and throw it at another with whom I disagree? I always thought the people in the crowd were some fringe members of society- roughnecks and rednecks who like to get drunk and fight. But a closer look reminds me that these are the religious leaders and temple elite. They are the good church folk who have standards to uphold, and Jesus is a threat to that order.

Religious violence is all around. Queen Elizabeth is the first British monarch to step foot onto Irish soil since 1911 in a goodwill visit this week. Nationalism and religion combined over these many decades and violence took place. Even this week, protesters took to the streets of Dublin. We see rejoicing in the streets of the US over the death of Osama bin Laden while at the same time Islamic Fundamentalists protest the US in the streets of Egypt...both see the other as a threat to their way of life and religious order.

Some are willing to kill in the name of God and that good order.

Matthew Skinner writes: "If we make this passage only about Stephen, we might neglect to notice the stones littering the ground around us, which either implicate us or cause us to cry out for deliverance from cycles of violence." (www.workingpreacher.org)

I wonder how we treat one another and our neighbors witnesses to the broader world.

This week as some of us on the Transformation Team met with the Rev. Stan Ott who is guiding us through the Acts 16:5 process. We heard these perceptions of young people about Christian. These finding are explained in the book *unChristian*.

The 440 respondents identified Christians as:

- Hypocritical (saying one thing and doing another)
- Too focused on getting converts (viewing people as targets)
- Anti-homosexual (bigoted)
- Sheltered (old fashioned, boring, and out of touch with reality)
- Too political (motivated by conservative political agenda)
- Judgmental (quick to judge others)¹

In 1996, this same Barna Research Institutes released a report "Christianity has a Strong Positive Image Despite Fewer Active Participants." At that time 85% of outsiders shared that positive perception. Only a decade later 38% of young people claim they have a bad impression of present-day Christianity. They see Christians as having an "us-versus-them" mentality.

To that news I have a few reactions. First, I am heart broken by the witness of the church to those outside of the church.

But beyond sad, I am compelled to share the love of Christ with those I meet in the form of a cup of cold water or sharing life with the people whom Jesus spent time with over meals or along the road.

Most of all I am convicted. It is time for me and each of us to examine how our witness reveals the Jesus who reigns in heaven for us. Christians dwell with God and allow the Holy Spirit that dwells in us to shine forth the light and love of Christ. And when we do not, we do not point people to the God we worship. We must allow Christ to dwell in us.

Which reminds me of another bumper sticker I've seen which quotes Gandhi.

"I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ."

Phillip Yancey tells a story in his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*. *Listen...*

Gandhi and Reverend Charles Andrews, a Presbyterian missionary, were walking together in South Africa. "The two suddenly find their way blocked by young thugs. Reverend Andrews takes one look at the menacing gangsters and decides to run for it. Gandhi stops him. 'Doesn't the New Testament say if an enemy strikes you on the right cheek you should offer him the left?' Andrews mumbles that he thought the phrase was used metaphorically. 'I'm not so sure,' Gandhi replies. 'I suspect he meant you must show courage - be willing to take a blow, several blows, to show you will not strike back nor will you be turned aside. And when you do that it calls on something in human nature, something that makes his hatred decrease and his respect increase. I think Christ grasped that and I have seen it work.'" said Gandhi.

In the manner of Stephen may we look with forgiveness at our enemies even as we trust God with our whole life remembering the words of Jesus,

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me."

May the Christ who dwells in unity with the Father and Holy Spirit, richly dwell in you so that we the church and each one individually can show others Jesus who is the way, the truth, and the life. Amen.

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¹ see Kinnaman and Lyons, *unChristian, what a new Generation thinks about Christianity...and Why it Matters*, pp.11

²Phillip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, (Zondervan; Grand Rapids) 1995, p.121.