

Words Forming Witnesses

Psalm 8 & Ezekiel 2:4b-7
(Hymns – 291, 298, 299, 300)
May 26, 2013
(Trinity Sunday)

A Rebellious People

The words of this morning's memory and ponder passage are taken from the call to the prophet Ezekiel. It's actually a passage that our Presbyterian *Book of Common Order* suggests be read at an ordination or induction service for ministers within our denomination.

So, listen again to the passage, but imagine that you are participating in a service where a person who has prepared for ministry among you, to work with you as a Minister of Word and Sacrament, is being authorized to do that work by the church authorities.

*Thus says the Lord.
Whether they hear or refuse to hear
(for they are a rebellious house),
they shall know that there has been
a prophet among them.
And you, O mortal, do not be afraid of them,
and do not be afraid of their words,
though briars and thorns surround you
and you live among scorpions;
so not be afraid of their words,
and do not be dismayed at their looks,
for they are a rebellious house.
You shall speak my words to them,
whether they hear or refuse to hear;
for they are a rebellious house.*

There are some really important positives in this passage that are worth remembering if you have answered the call to manage and lead among God's people.

You do have the responsibility to speak God's word as clearly and convincingly as you can, no matter what the response.

You will encounter resistance to that word, both within and outside of the church.

And God will ensure that the word is heard.

But what has always bothered me about this passage is the blanket characterization of the congregation as rebellious.

The attitude that can be read into this passage all too readily, the attitude of me as minister being sent by God to address the rebellion of the scorpions among whom I have to work, feeds the kind of clergy/congregational conflict we find all too often in the church these days.

It's a subtle thing.

Most clergy in conflict would deny this is the case.

Most congregations in conflict see it this way.

As most of you know,
my vision for ministry with congregations
is one of courageous collaboration and collegiality.
Together, one conversation after another,
We discern, decide, and discipline ourselves
to be faithful to God's love that enables us to bless.
We nourish each other to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.
As we come together with the Holy Trinity in the joy of worship,
as we become teachable through the Spirit's inspiring work,
as well we share the profound sense of belonging that God has given us,
and as we take the revived sense of human dignity
that has arisen from these practices
out into the world to bless it,
we do mission and ministry together as a community.

So, I came at this passage this week looking for a different perspective,
one that helped me hear the passage differently,
one that redeemed this passage for me in my ministries.

Now, let's be clear.

There is a lot of rebellion in the church these days,
just as there has been in the past.

The church is in need of constant reform and revival,
constant conversion as it grows into its God-given potential.
But it's not a rebellion that separates clergy from congregations.

It's a rebellion that we share.

I'm just as rebellious as you at times,
probably more so.

The inner scorpions in all of us
can be triggered and aroused all too easily and all too often
in the midst of the briars and thorns of life.

I thought first this week about what I am rebelling against.

According to God's living Word, Jesus Christ,
I, and we, are rebelling against the law and the prophets
When we deny in any way that our flourishing depends on
loving God with every dimension of our energy
and loving our neighbours as ourselves.

That's the core of Christianity.

Love, love, love –

God, others, and self.

It's nice neat Trinitarian formula

for this Trinity Sunday.

And it won't take us long,
given a reasonable pause for honest self-examination,
to discover times when we have rebelled against this invitation,
when we have stubbornly refused to step into this kind of community.

We have sought security in places and people other than God.
We have sought affection in ways that manipulate other people.
And we have sought power for ourselves in ways that violate our best selves.

We've been SAPs – security-, affection-, and power- seeking devices
rebellious against the true selves God created and redeemed us to be.
We have not walked with Jesus in the ways of well-being.
We have not been open to the presence of the Holy Spirit
inviting us to embrace flourishing lives of blessing.

That's been our rebellion against God.
It's rooted in a fear-filled socialization in our culture.
We are trapped in false selves that seek
security, affection, and power
in all the wrong places –
nationalism, racism, and aggression;
physical appearance and submission; and
violence, invasion, and destruction.

And we are all in it together.

So the prophetic word comes to us all.
And it says, "Love, love, love –
Love God, love others, and love yourself."
Anyone without the others is rebellion against the way God made us.
Anyone without the others is a rejection of God's invitation to bless.
Anyone without the others keeps us enslaved to false sources of flourishing.

Another thought occurred to me this week
as I was letting this passage convert me yet again,
as I was redeemed to see things differently
by the Spirit's work through this passage.

There is a legitimate and necessary for of Christian rebellion.
We are called, in a very real sense, to be a rebellious people.
It is *wrong* to rebel against God's ways.
It is *right* to rebel against those things that interfere with God's ways.

So, when we invite friends and family to come as see
what the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are doing here at Brentwood,
we are rebelling against the complacency
that leaves people to their own devices,
rebellling against the societal norms of not talking about our faith.

When we commit intentional acts of kindness,
through a smile, a helping hand, a caring phone call,
we are rebelling against the curse of isolation and loneliness
in our society's celebration of individualism
and provision of sterile care facilities.

When we rise up in protest against the callous and corrupt exercise of power
by demanding compassionate prosperity and accountable politics,
we are rebelling against those claim exclusive privileges for themselves alone.
We are inviting people to consider and co-create
a commonwealth of mutuality and well-being.

The prophetic word for this morning, then,
Is be vigilant that you are not rebelling against
the kind of security, affection, and power
that is found in your relationship with God
as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
That relationship is the source of true and blessed flourished.

Know that we are all in this together as beloved friends of God,
all of us,
called to be a community of compassion
as we nourish each other to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ
in worship, learning, fellowship, and service.