

## Sunday March 17, 2019

Scripture Reading: Luke 13:31-35

31At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." 32He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. 33Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' 34Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 35See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

I had already finished my sermon for this week on Thursday before the massacre in Christchurch, NZ, took place on Friday, when 98 Muslims were shot, 50 of whom died while they were at worship. I couldn't ignore this event and just preach the sermon that I had prepared. I had to make a comment.

They were killed by a white supremacist solely because of his hatred for their religion. They were killed because they were Muslim.

Religious and race-based hatred in this world must be rejected in all manners!

While we don't know what religion the terrorist is, and while white supremacy has no official religion, it is most often tied to a right-wing Christian view of society, and quite frequently, a Protestant Christian view. The movement known as the Christian Identity teaches that whites are God's chosen people and that only whites are eligible for salvation. The Christian Identity movement holds that all non-whites will either be exterminated or enslaved in order to serve the white race in the new Heavenly Kingdom on Earth under the reign of Jesus Christ. Many white supremacist groups identify with the teachings of the Christian Identity movement and use those teachings to support their racist views.

Is the murderer in NZ a Christian? We don't know. What we do know is that he hated Muslims. And we do know that he recently travelled to Europe to study historic battles sites between Christians and Muslims. And we do know that he was playing a Bosnian Serb nationalist song while he was on his way to do the killings. A song that glorifies former Bosnian Serb leader, Radovan Karadzic, a Christian, who was convicted of genocide against Muslims.

Hate can find its way into any religion. We've seen it historically in Muslims against Jews, Jews against Muslims, Muslims against Christians, Christians against Muslims, and Christians against Jews. We've even seen it in Protestant Christians against Catholic Christians.

In my own family background, I had a racist history to overcome as my great-grandfather was a member of the Orange Lodge and the Irish Protestant Benevolent Society, both racist anti-Catholic groups. He was also Chief of the Hamilton Police at the outbreak of WW2 and was responsible for the mass arrest of Italian Catholics on the accusation that they were fascist sympathizers. A claim which the Hamilton city council later admitted was wrong and purely racist. And, his son, my grandfather taught my father to hate Catholics, and call them derogatory names. I grew up with these awful names spoken in my household.

We must reject hate in all forms, but most especially when it's committed in the name of religion, especially our own religion. We cannot control hatred creeping into other religions, but must definitely guard against it creeping into our own.

Historically, the Nazis were supported by Protestant Christian churches in Germany. The Ku Klux Klan claimed to espouse a Protestant Christian view of society. Slavery and anti-black racism were supported by Protestant Christian churches in the US. Apartheid in South Africa was supported by Protestant Christian churches. Residential schools in Canada were run by Christian churches. And in all these cases church leaders plucked passages out of the bible to justify their teachings of hate. If we believe in a God of love, then we cannot stand for hatred being preached in God's name in any form, in any place. And we must challenge every occasion of people using the bible to justify hatred.

Now, if you'll allow me, let me carry on with an edited version of the sermon I had planned to preach today.

I had originally planned to begin by talking about the barriers to ministry we face as a church today. Many churches face declining membership and givings which limit abilities to fund ministry staff positions and there are fewer volunteers to rely on for leadership positions. Buildings are expensive to maintain, sapping financial resources for mission.

CBC published an article last weekend citing a report from a national heritage building agency that due to declining membership and resources, over the next ten years Canada is likely to see the closure of over 9,000 churches, that's 1/3 of all the churches in the country likely to close. Lots of churches are struggling with the challenge of declining resources. It's a challenging time to be serving Jesus in this country.

And, we face a time when we really need to reach out and invite others to come and experience Jesus' message of radical love and inclusivity. Yet, we're not accustomed to sharing our faith.

In generations past, people just came through our doors. We didn't need to go out and invite them. We didn't need to share Jesus with them. Most of Canadian society was already Christian. Christians were everywhere. We could just open up a new church and it would be immediately filled with people. We didn't have to work at it. When this church was built, we regularly had about 250 people in worship on a weekly basis. Churches were booming back then.

That all began to change in the 60s when people started to turn away from the church and stopped coming. And it's been getting progressively worse ever since. Now Christians are in the minority in Canadian society. No longer can we just open the doors and expect people to walk in. They don't come.

We have to go invite them. We have to give them a good reason to come. We have to give them a life-changing reason to come. We have to invite them to experience Jesus. We've never had to do that before. We've never been taught how to do that. And many of us are embarrassed to speak to others about Jesus.

These are just some of the challenges that threaten to get in the way of our doing ministry in the community.

Maybe today's bible text can give us some insight into how to deal with these challenges.

Today's bible text is a very obscure and difficult text to work with. There's not much story here and nothing much happens in the text to derive deep meaning from. But we'll see what we can get out of it.

In order to help us understand today's text, it helps if we back up a few verses to what happened just before. Just prior to today's story, Jesus had been teaching and healing in the synagogue. And he got into trouble from the leader of the synagogue for healing a crippled woman on the Sabbath. Since the sabbath is a day of rest, the leader felt it was wrong for Jesus to heal on this day, and he criticized Jesus in front of the whole crowd. Jesus responded by calling the man a hypocrite and pointing out that he waters and feeds his animals on the sabbath, looking after them. How much more important is it to look after this crippled woman? In saying this, Jesus embarrassed the leader of the synagogue in front of the crowd. And he began to get a reputation as a trouble-maker, just for speaking God's truth to people in power.

Then we come to today's story, which begins with the Pharisees coming to warn Jesus that King Herod is out to get him. This is very strange, because, not only had Jesus just finished calling the temple leader a hypocrite, but just two chapters earlier Jesus had also publicly called the Pharisees hypocrites. So, the Pharisees also saw Jesus as a trouble-maker. So, why would they now come to warn Jesus? Why would they want to help him? We would think that the Pharisees would be happy to see Herod capture Jesus. So why would they come to warn him? The bible doesn't answer this question for us. It just leaves it an unexplained mystery.

This story takes place during Jesus' journey to Jerusalem which began back in chapter 9. Jesus has been slowly making his way through Galilee and Judea towards Jerusalem as he gets ready to enter Jerusalem for the Passover, which will ultimately lead to his arrest, trial, and execution for being a trouble-maker. We know that Jesus is going to encounter resistance to his ministry along the way, especially when he arrives in Jerusalem. So, it shouldn't be a surprise to us that he's experiencing some of that resistance now – that King Herod wants him dead.

Jesus' response to this threat is also strange, and almost comical. First, he calls King Herod a fox and then he basically tells the Pharisees, "can't you see I'm busy casting out demons and healing people? And I'll be busy doing that for the rest of today, tomorrow and then the next day, THEN I'll be done and on my way. So, Herod can just leave me alone till then, and then I will be out of here and out of his hair."

Imagine the audacity of Jesus, to basically say to a king, "back off buddy! Can't you see I'm busy doing God's work?!" But this is basically what he said. And if it wasn't coming from the Son of God, we'd probably be gulping in response. I mean, what he said was true, but kings are generally accustomed to a bit more respect than that. And they generally don't like being talked back to.

Then Jesus says an even stranger thing. He says that Herod can't kill him here outside of Jerusalem, because prophets can only be killed in Jerusalem. He says, "34 Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets."

Now, here's where we have a problem that brings us back to my beginning comments about hatred in religion. To be fair and honest, Jerusalem didn't actually have a reputation for killing prophets. In all of the entire OT, and all of the lives of the many prophets that God sent to the people of Israel over the centuries, there are only two instances of any prophets being killed.

The first comes from the OT book of 2 Chronicles when God sent Zechariah to preach to the people of Israel.

Now those of you who know your bible well, know there's an OT prophet named Zechariah who had a book of the OT named after him. This is a different Zechariah. Same name. Different prophet.

This Zechariah said to the people "If you abandon God then God will abandon you! Turn away from your evil ways and turn back to God!" And they didn't like what they heard, so they appealed to the king who had Zechariah stoned to death.

The second incident is from 200 years later, from the book of Jeremiah, when the prophet Uriah went to King Jehoiakim to preach the word of God to the king and the king didn't like what he heard, so Uriah had to flee for his life, and he ran all the way to Egypt. So, the king sent a hit squad to Egypt to bring Uriah back and then had him executed.

Any other references in the OT just refer back to these same two stories. Not much to really build a bad reputation over.

Jewish scholars tell us that Jerusalem actually did NOT have a reputation for being a place that killed its prophets. So where did this reputation come from?

The only places where we see this accusation are in the early Christian communities, where it's referenced twice in the Gospels and also, interestingly, in the Quran, where it claims 9 times that the Jews were guilty of killing prophets sent to them.

This has led some modern Jewish scholars to suggest that this is actually evidence of antisemitism creeping into early Islam and early Christianity. They suggest that Jesus may never have actually said these words, that it was more likely Luke and Matthew putting words into Jesus' mouth, reflecting a growing anti-Jewish racism in their early Christian communities.

We do know for a fact, after Jesus was executed, that some of the early Christian communities blamed the Jews for killing Jesus, and that that anti-Semitic attitude has carried on in some branches of Christianity right through to today. There are still Christian churches today who use passages like this to teach and justify hatred against Jews. So, we need to be very careful, especially today, to guard against potentially racist understandings of Scripture.

At any rate, Jesus knew that he was going to eventually be arrested and executed, and that it had to happen in Jerusalem. It couldn't happen before he got there.

Then Jesus says, "Soon I will be gone, and you won't see me again until you're ready to say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" Of course, he's referring to Palm Sunday, at the beginning of the Passover festival when Jesus enters Jerusalem humbly riding on a donkey, and the people gather in the streets to welcome him and throw down palm branches for him to ride across, and shout their praises for him, only days later to turn on him and cry out for him to be crucified. So, Jesus is getting ready for his final showdown in Jerusalem. He knows it's coming. And he carries on in the face of it.

Jesus knows he's going to be arrested and executed just for the crime of preaching a radical message of God's love that was threatening to the people in power, both in the temple and in the government. Jesus knows he's going to die, yet he doesn't quit. He doesn't give up. He carries on in the face of the threat.

So, can we do any less than Jesus did? Do we have the courage to stand up to the threats of this life and shout "Back off buddy! Can't you see I'm busy doing God's work?!"

No matter what threatens our ministry today, it is nowhere near the threat of execution like Jesus faced.

And, it's definitely nowhere near the threat of murder that our Muslim sisters and brothers faced in NZ this week just for practicing their worship of a loving God.

We face no threat even close to that.

So, can we not follow Jesus' example, and carry on in the face of any threat that comes before us?

Yes, we can.

Today, more than ever, the world needs the message of radical love and inclusivity that Jesus actually taught. In the face of hatred, especially hatred preached in the name of God, we must be ready to confront the world with Jesus' teachings of love. Are you ready to be a part of that movement?