

John 16:1-15

16 ¹⁻⁴“I’ve told you these things to prepare you for rough times ahead. They are going to throw you out of the meeting places. There will even come a time when anyone who kills you will think he’s doing God a favor. They will do these things because they never really understood the Father. I’ve told you these things so that when the time comes and they start in on you, you’ll be well-warned and ready for them.

The Friend Will Come

⁴⁻⁷“I didn’t tell you this earlier because I was with you every day. But now I am on my way to the One who sent me. Not one of you has asked, ‘Where are you going?’ Instead, the longer I’ve talked, the sadder you’ve become. So let me say it again, this truth: It’s better for you that I leave. If I don’t leave, the Friend won’t come. But if I go, I’ll send him to you.

⁸⁻¹¹“When he comes, he’ll expose the error of the godless world’s view of sin, righteousness, and judgment: He’ll show them that their refusal to believe in me is their basic sin; that righteousness comes from above, where I am with the Father, out of their sight and control; that judgment takes place as the ruler of this godless world is brought to trial and convicted.

¹²⁻¹⁵“I still have many things to tell you, but you can’t handle them now. But when the Friend comes, the Spirit of the Truth, he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is. He won’t draw attention to himself, but will make sense out of what is about to happen and, indeed, out of all that I have done and said. He will honor me; he will take from me and deliver it to you. Everything the Father has is also mine. That is why I’ve said, ‘He takes from me and delivers to you.’

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John 16:1-15

“Rough Times Ahead: The Spirit Will Guide You”

After Jesus gives his instructions to his followers (Chapters 14-15) – where he says to them: do what I’ve been doing, listen to my commandments, and love as I have loved you; he follows it with a warning: There will be rough times ahead. No joke, there will be rough times ahead, especially for Jesus! This is one of those times I really wanted to know his words as closely as possible, so I looked at the Greek side by side translation for that sentence and breathed a little thank you for my seminary education. It says, I have spoken to you so you won’t be *scandelisthete*. Literally it means – so you won’t fall into a trap! But it can also mean, I’ve told you this so that you won’t fall away, or so that you won’t sin, or so that you won’t become indignant or shocked. It is where we get our English word, scandalized. Jesus is telling them this so they won’t be scandalized by what’s going to happen next. Jesus wraps up this pep talk not with the security of a win, but the guarantee of a loss. He says to them - I’m telling you this so you won’t be shocked when everything goes to hell – and quite soon actually.

Jesus knew what he was doing, so he was not surprised when the mob came to capture him following a night of prayer. He was not taken aback when they took him to be tried for blasphemy against the church and treason against the state. He had every reason to expect that he would be executed as a criminal on some rather ambiguous charges, for crimes and sins he never committed. He knew that doing his work, and following his commands, and living out his love was going to disrupt the power of the Empire and destabilize the authority of the church. So he gave his disciples ample warning to get ready for being thrown out of places of worship, and to expect to be threatened and punished for being who Jesus taught them to be. There would be so much hate directed toward them IN THE NAME OF GOD, that those who would kill them rather than listen

to them would think that they were doing God a favor. Literally the Greek says that these people will believe they are offering worship to God to kill any one of Jesus' known followers.

Maybe I'm telling you this so that you will be a bit shocked and scandalized by what you are hearing. This talk did not make the disciples feel very upbeat and hopeful to follow their Lord. After all this time, they still were surprised and saddened that he was the prophesied lamb being led to the slaughter. He wasn't going to turn it all around and make life prosperous and easy for these marginalized Jews living under Roman occupation. Love is not a victory march. Thank you, Leonard Cohen. Thank you, prophets of the Old Testament. But love is the only way forward for the marginalized, the disinherited, the forgotten. It was a message that could only be told by a marginalized Jew who knew the steadfast love of Yahweh for his chosen people, even while living under the oppressive thumb of an all-pervasive and all-powerful government like Rome. The powerful and authoritarian voices think of such radical love as weakness, not strength. But we who have heard the Jesus story time and again, ought to know differently. Loving this fully, this completely with a love that demands that you show compassion toward both neighbor and enemy, will get you thrown out of places of worship, and will get you threatened and punished by those who govern with the power to include or exclude. Then, loving the Father the way Jesus loves the Father will always be labeled as blasphemous. When the church is acting out of the desire to perpetuate its own power, the only relationship they want the people to have with God is fear. The all-powerful God is supposed to be mediated by the priest, or cleric, or church government, not known by individual people.

And then just as Jesus predicted, for the first few centuries of Christianity, it was true that being associated with him would make your life rather uncomfortable. The followers of Jesus had to meet in secret. They were the spectacle to be fed to the lions when they refused to speak against their faith. They were at the very least, ridiculed for their quirky ways, like praying and eating

together without regard to any cultural standards, sharing their belongings in common with each other, and accepting all kinds of weirdos and sinners and riff-raff into their organization. Oddly enough, that's what always comforted me about my faith, even as a child; it was hearing good preachers and teachers telling me that everyone belongs to God. This has been confirmed for me by wise theologians and teachers of the faith ever since. One such person I've been reading lately is Howard Thurman, an African-American theologian whose writing was first published in 1949, and it is amazing how true it still rings today. He says that Christianity, as it was born in the mind of this Jewish thinker, appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed. It was those weirdos, and sinners, and riff-raff, it was the women, and fishermen, and poor ones with no power who heard this truth about love and couldn't keep quiet about it. They had nothing left to lose, so this inner message of hope made perfect sense. The only way to quiet the incessant voice of the enemy telling them they were no good was to look upon the whole world with the eyes of love, the eyes of God.

It isn't until later that Christianity gets co-opted, like religions so often do, by the powerful and the dominant who want to use it as a tool for oppression. As Thurman so aptly says, that "must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus. 'In him was life, and the life was the light of men.' Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage, for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them." (Jesus and the Disinherited, p. 18-19)

It may seem odd to us, but the persecution that the early followers of Jesus experienced was exactly what reminded them that they might be on the right track with this love business. There's a reason the poor and disenfranchised aren't so surprised by recent turns in our world that have exposed hatred we thought had been buried or solved as civil rights legislation prevented legal discrimination against a person for the color of their skin. They've seen it all along. It's those of us who have been comfortable, who have had at least a bit of ease and prosperity, who are waking up

to a rough undertow of trouble in the world and wondering what it's all about. Jesus taught his disciples to open their eyes to the situations of the marginalized and to show compassion. That continued to happen throughout his ministry. Though those on the fringes of society heard his message of love and finally realized that they were loved completely by God, those who had so called "regular" lives, or even lives with prestige, had to wake up to find the living light in what he was saying and choose to tag along.

But the beauty is this: Jesus gave us a companion, a friend, an advocate for helping us when we are in that situation when our faith calls us into danger, or our compassion leads us to do unpopular things. He sent the Spirit to be our courage, to be our guide, to be our witness to the Truth. I'm not sure how we'd make spiritual strides in the world without that kind of assurance. It helped me speak up on the day as a young pastor that KKK materials had been tacked up on the bulletin board at my church. I chose to preach about it then, and I'm willing to continue to speak out for the marginalized as all God's prophets have done before me.

In reading a story from Krista Tippett's interview of Black Lives Matter leader, Patrisse Cullors, and pediatrician Robert K. Ross, CEO of the California Endowment that is researching trauma and resistance, I was reminded that those who speak up and speak out for love and justice are often scandalized and persecuted in their own lives, but that it matters that they do so. Dr. Ross reminds us of how history tames their stories over time. He said in the interview, "And at the time and at the moment, they're always criticized, marginalized, targeted for being outrageous, right? I mean, Martin Luther King is now on a stamp, and it's a holiday, and there are parades. And as you mentioned earlier, Patrisse, he was detested...in many circles during his time, as was Gandhi, as was Mandela, put in jail for 27 years, and it was just fine, thank you. And so, if you're not being accused of being outrageous, then you're probably not successfully deploying activism, is one point. The second point, which I hope we get to — I just want to tease it — the science on the trauma side and

what it does to us is a lot better developed than the resiliency side, but there is something about civic activism and engagement that appears to be powerfully immunizing against poor health.”

Jesus wasn't advocating for us to experience trauma and persecution so that we would be put down and stomped on by the world. He was advocating for us to join him in resisting the evil forces in this world. If anything, that's what his last days should teach us, that he gave his life fully and willingly as an act of non-violent resistance against the powers that would rob human beings of their dignity and worth. Now, I believe we need the Spirit's help and full cooperation to be able to do that. There have been times when I've thought I should be a greater activist, outrageous and persecuted, more “on fire” than I am for Jesus and his Word in the world. Being a pastor is more often filled with days of offering comfort, or study, or writing bulletins, and attending meetings. And yet it is helping others train for the resistance that Jesus asks of us – whatever that discomfort happens to be, because it will be different for each of us. This was made clear to me through learning that happened at my former church in Oak Ridge. First Presbyterian was in mission with a Chicago-based gang rehabilitation ministry called Good News Partners. Every time the pastor from that partnership would come to visit us, his stories became so sensational that everyone oohed and aahed that he could speak to these street kids and be making such a difference. For a while it made me feel inadequate as a pastor. Why wasn't I doing something important like gang ministry in inner city Chicago? Maybe, it was because I am not from a huge city like Chicago, and have never been around gangs other than beer drinking groups of small town rednecks from my own high school. That's when I realized, that was his calling, not my calling – which didn't make my calling any less important than his work because mine seemed less dangerous, at least physically so. I've never had a gun pointed to my head because I'm a pastor, and yet, those times I have been called to stand my

ground for love, because it's what Jesus would do, or what something he said has repeated itself in me, that still takes courage. And that still takes the Spirit standing very, very close.

Today, on Pentecost Sunday, we call for the Spirit to be with us. Come Holy Spirit, come and guide us. And that should make us tremble a bit, because it means that we must be willing to walk where Jesus walked, and that isn't always such a comfortable trip. So I do and I don't pray for the Spirit to be close. We need, but sometimes we don't want the Spirit's attention. There are times to meet in secret and times to proclaim our faith in front of those who have the power to release the lions. Be bold in your faith. Have courage to be at least as determined as the disciples, yes those disciples, who were a mixed blessing in getting the word out about Jesus' good news of love. There will be rough times ahead. Jesus predicted it then, and I dare say, the pattern is one that repeats itself – probably with each passing generation. Standing strong in our faith, especially as we walk beside those Jesus loves, will take everything we have to give. Amen.

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships so that we will live deeply and from the heart.

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and the exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain to joy.

May God bless us with just enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this old world, so that we will do those things others claim cannot be done.