



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Acknowledge Me Before Men

Luke 12:1-12

Fr. William Klock

November 23, 2014 –

Sunday Next Before Advent

As we make our way through St. Luke's Gospel we see that one of his key themes is discipleship—what it means to *follow* Jesus. At first we followed Jesus with his friends as they travelled around their home territory of Galilee. For the last couple of chapters now we've been following Jesus with them as he goes to Jerusalem to fulfil or to complete his mission. And one of the things we see as Jesus gets closer to Jerusalem is that opposition to him and to his message becomes more focused and intense. Luke stresses that Jesus requires our all. You can't follow Jesus half-heartedly. You can't allow other loyalties to compete with Jesus. And to follow Jesus means giving yourself completely over to *his* agenda—we've not only got to surrender our own agendas, but we've also got to surrender to Jesus our old and mistaken ideas about what we think God's agenda is.

Before we get into Luke's Gospel this morning, I'd like to jump ahead in the story—actually, into the book of Acts, which is Luke's sequel. In Acts 6 and 7 he tells us about Stephen. Stephen was in the first group of deacons called by the apostles. Luke says that he was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:5). Luke also says that Stephen did great wonders and signs among the people (7:8) and that he got the attention of the Jews. They brought trumped up charges against him and before long the elders and scribes—the same people who had opposed Jesus—dragged him before the high priest. Even as Stephen was confronted with false charged and lying witnesses Luke says that “his face was like the face of an angel” (6:15). Stephen, I expect, knew what was coming. There were probably men already outside gathering stones to throw at him. But instead of caving into pressure, instead of fearing death, instead of watering down the Good News or even renouncing Jesus, he began to preach. Chapter 7 is Luke's

record of Stephen's sermon. He walked the high priest and the council through the history Israel. He showed how over and over Israel had twisted God's agenda of redemption to her own agenda—that while they lived their lives in the name of God they were really, as he says, a “stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears...always resist[ing] the Holy Spirit.” He rebuked them: “As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered” (7:51-52).

Stephen's witness challenges us in more than one way. Where we might be tempted to pull our punches, to water down our message, or maybe even to renounce Jesus, Stephen stood strong, rebuked the people, and preached the Good News. But Stephen also challenges the modern notion we've picked up that if we only stand firm for Jesus everything will be just fine—that God wants us always to be healthy, wealthy, and happy. Most Christians throughout history have known better. Our brothers and sisters around the world facing persecution know better. Somewhere along the line we in the West confused our material prosperity and our freedom with God's agenda. Stephen, on the other hand was rejected even as the Holy Spirit inspired his witness and gave him gospel courage. Luke says that even as Jesus manifested himself to Stephen, standing at the right hand of God in all his glory, the Jews dragged him out of town and stoned him. And even as Stephen was being murdered, he cried out to the Lord, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (7:60). Stephen charged into the darkness with the light of Christ and even as he was rejected and murdered, he refused to use the light to condemn. To the end it was always about redemption—just as it was for Jesus.

I strongly suspect that Luke had Stephen in mind as he wrote the portion of his Gospel that we come to this morning. I also suspect that Stephen had these words of Jesus in his mind as the Jews dragged him before the high priest and as they stoned him. How can we stand with men and women like Stephen as radically committed disciples? Look at Luke 12, beginning with verses 1-3:

In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.

The last episode of the journey that Luke showed us involved Jesus rebuking the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. They'd mistaken God's purposes. They'd twisted the law into something it was never intended to be. Instead of taking the light God had given them and charging into the darkness to rescue the lost, they used that light to justify themselves while condemning the people lost in darkness. Their light had become darkness.

But this isn't strictly a problem for Pharisees. This was Israel's problem in general—the Pharisees had simply taken it to extremes. And now Jesus warns his disciples not to let this same leaven of hypocrisy infect their own hearts. Once you allow even a little bit, it infects the whole thing. Jesus is preparing to lead any who will follow him in an exodus from our slavery to sin. This leaven language takes us back to the first Exodus when God led his people out of their Egyptian slavery. The night before—and at every Passover thereafter—they ate unleavened bread. To allow even a little bit of leaven into the baking process would spoil the whole batch and without unleavened bread there was no Passover. If hypocrisy is allowed into the hearts of Jesus' disciples it will stop us in our tracks in this new and greater exodus. Jesus shines his light into our hearts and calls us to repentance—that's the first step in the new exodus. Hypocrisy is the opposite of repentance—it takes that light and twists it into a means of self-justification; it turns the light into darkness. Hypocrisy won't stand up under persecution. And Jesus warns: persecution is coming. Like metal in a crucible, our faith will be tested in the fire. Will it be refined like gold or silver, or is it dross that will burn away and leave nothing but slag and ash? Our faith is known only to us today, but when persecution comes the content of our faith will be, as Jesus said, declared from the

housetops—it will be made public, just as it was for Stephen.

In verses 4 and 5 Jesus digs deeper into this. What he does is make one of his claims or appeals that sounds completely outrageous—even self-destructive or masochistic. The closer he gets to Jerusalem the more he'll be talking like this and the more he'll be calling his followers to this kind of outrageous kind of discipleship. And yet as he explains, his call isn't as outrageous as it sounds when we consider our eternal hope.

“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into Gehenna. Yes, I tell you, fear him!”

This is a hard saying and yet Jesus begins by addressing his disciples—and addressing *us*—as his “friends”. He’s not making this call like some fire-and-brimstone preacher shouting on a street-corner to strangers to beware the fire of hell. He’s saying all of this to the people he *knows* and to the people he *loves* and he’s saying it to them *because* he knows and loves them. He wanted them—and he wants us—to understand that we have an eternal hope and that we need to live our lives—we need to be disciples—in light of that great hope. What we do here is directly connected with that hope—with our destiny.

Death itself is a scary thing. Death in the face of persecution is even scarier. It’s normal to be afraid of “those who kill the body”. Jesus’ disciples were probably already more than a little uneasy about his earlier talk of being handed over to the authorities to be killed. They were probably uneasy about his talk of his lot also being their lot. And they’re no doubt becoming more and more uneasy as Jesus faces increasingly stiff opposition. The closer they get to Jerusalem the more they’re seeing that what Jesus has said might not be just “talk”—it might really happen. And in light of that reality Jesus now tells them: Don’t be afraid of your persecutors. They can kill your body, but they can’t change your eternal destiny. No, fear the Lord. When you’re tempted to turn aside from following me, when you’re tempted to turn aside from God’s

plan and God’s agenda in the face of persecution, remember that he’s the one you should really be afraid of. Men can kill your body, but God has authority to cast the rebellious into Gehenna. That was the valley outside Jerusalem where the pagans had offered their children as sacrifices to Baal and Molech. It was so unclean that King Josiah made it the city’s dump, where garbage was burned. Over time that unclean burning heap of garbage and corpses became an image for hell and for judgement. Jesus is saying that his friends should be more fearful of the Great Judge who has authority to cast rebellious sinners into hell than we should be of those rebellious sinners who threaten us. Jesus is beginning to give his disciples a framework around which to build an eternal perspective.

But the real key to all this comes in verses 6 and 7:

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.

God *remembers* us. God *knows* us. That’s his character and that’s the key to following Jesus and that’s the key to living according to his agenda in the face of persecution.

Notice, though, that this isn’t a promise that persecution won’t happen. The sparrows are sold in the marketplace and eaten, and yet God still knows and remembers them. We may not understand, but that’s because we’re not the God who knows the unknowable—we’re not the God who knows how many hairs are on our heads. And so Jesus tells us as his friends: Don’t be afraid. If God remembers the sparrows that are sold and eaten, how much more will he remember you as you face persecution for his sake? Consider that a God who has authority to cast sinners into hell ought to be feared more than those sinners who can kill the body, but that also means that the God who has this kind of authority is also a God whose faithfulness and whose loving care can never be confounded by persecution. This is the same God in whom Jesus trusted as he went to the cross. This was the same God John the Baptist trusted while still on Herod’s death

row. This was the same God in whom the prophets of old trusted as they were rejected by Israel. This is the same God in whom Stephen trusted as he stood proclaiming the Good News before the high priest and as he was stoned. Brothers and sisters, it’s in persecution that the Holy Spirit inspires the greatest witness in his people. It’s in persecution that the light Jesus has given us shines the brightest.

And yet we might ask: What good is that faithful witness for us? What good is it that my light shines brightly when I still face death for my faith? This is what Jesus gets at in verses 8 and 9:

“And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.”

What happens here on earth has a heavenly analogue. Jesus gives us an image of one of the saints being persecuted—think of Stephen. He stands falsely accused. He stands condemned. He even goes to his death, all because he refused to deny his faith in the lordship and the saving work of Jesus. The earthly scene is sad, disturbing, and bloody and yet its counterpart in heaven is a scene of glory. As Jesus’ people acknowledge him in faith before men, Jesus himself acknowledges them before the angels in heaven. There’s more at stake than the earthly court. As Stephen stood before the Jewish council and the earthy high priest to plead his case, there was a heavenly tribunal seated as well, but in heaven that tribunal includes the angels and Jesus, the great high priest. And as the earthly high priest condemned Stephen to death for his witness, the great high priest in heaven granted him eternal life.

Of course, Jesus warns us as well: If acknowledging him before men means that he will acknowledge us in heaven, to deny him before men—to cave in to pressure and to persecution—is to be denied by him before the heavenly court.

There’s an invitation here. It’s an invitation to total commitment and to total loyalty to Jesus and to the kingdom of God. It’s an invitation to the disciples who are already following—an invitation

to follow in light of this deeper understanding of what it means to follow. It's an invitation to the crowds pressing in. And it's even an invitation to the Pharisees—an invitation to give up their hypocrisy and to give themselves over to God's agenda in Jesus. Look at verse 10:

And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

The Pharisees were hypocrites and they'd spoken against Jesus because they didn't understand. They had confused their agenda for God's agenda. They had wrong ideas about the kingdom of God. They were lost in the darkness. They spoke against Jesus but only because they didn't really understand what they were saying. Jesus is shining his light into the darkness and inviting them to take hold of that light—to let him lead them out of the dark. But there's a warning here too. It's one thing to say stupid things about Jesus out of ignorance. People without the Holy Spirit do that. That's the problem Jesus came to fix. But there's no forgiveness for those who blaspheme the Spirit himself.

What does that mean: to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit? As a pastor I've had more than one person come to me convinced they were bound for hell because they'd committed the unforgiveable sin. Usually they think that some blasphemous thing they've said is the problem—that it can't be forgiven. Friends, take comfort and know that that's not what Jesus is talking about here. *There is no sin too big to be forgiven.* If there's every any question about that in your mind, remember who it was who gave his life for yours. God himself came in the person of Jesus, in his perfect holiness to be the perfect sacrifice. There's nothing you can do as a finite human being that the perfection of God's spotless lamb can't cover in his sacrifice. In Matthew and in Mark Jesus made this same statement about blasphemy in response to the accusation that he was casting out demons by the prince of demons. We saw this accusation in Chapter 11 here in Luke's Gospel. To blaspheme the Holy Spirit is to attribute his work to the devil—it's to condemn the very God who has come to bring redemption and to turn the hearts of men

and women to repentance and redemption. It's to declare Jesus' well of living water to be poison. Once you've made that judgement, you'll never drink that water. You've cut yourself off from the only source of life and the only source of forgiveness. That's what it means to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. Brothers and sisters, if you ever fear having blasphemed the Spirit, the very fact that you're worried about it is proof that you haven't committed it—proof that you haven't rejected the life offered by Jesus and the Spirit.

And consider what the Spirit does for us when we face persecution. Jesus said that as God never forgets the sparrows sold in the market, he will not forget us. His Spirit stands with us as he stood with Stephen and as he has stood with all the persecuted saints and with all the martyrs who stood for Jesus even to death. Look at verses 11-12:

And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

Let me say first that this isn't an excuse not to be prepared to speak up for Jesus. St. Peter reminds us to *always* be "prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks...for a reason for the hope that is in" us (1 Peter 3:15). Jesus is not giving preachers permission not to study and to think and to prepare for our sermons in the hope that the Spirit will spontaneously give us words to say in the pulpit. No, this is a word of encouragement from Jesus that when our persecutors come for us, when they drag us before rebellious sinners on trumped up charges and demand an explanation, God will not forget us. In our baptism each of us was filled with the Holy Spirit. He's the one who regenerates our hearts and renews our minds. He's the one who unites us to Jesus and through whom Jesus' life flows to us. The Spirit is the *parakletos*—the one who comes alongside, the helper and as he inspired Stephen's final proclamation of the Good News before the high priest, he will inspire our witness too.

Brothers and sisters, we've been taught the stories of the ancient martyrs: men and

women like Stephen who were killed by the Jews and later generations killed by Romans and others. We hear today about our brothers and sisters being put to death as they stand firmly with Jesus in Syria and Iraq. It's unlikely that you and will face that same sort of persecution here in North America, and yet the saints—that cloud of witnesses—surround us. The Holy Spirit fills us, helps us, inspires us, and walks beside us. They are with us when we're tempted to stay silent when we see evil and injustice in the world; they are with us when we're afraid to do what is right at work or at school or around our unbelieving friends; they are with us when we're hesitant to share the Good News because we're afraid of being laughed at or shunned. Friends, remember that Jesus exhorts us to stand with him. To face condemnation for his sake on earth is to be acclaimed before the angels in heaven for our faithfulness. Jesus has led us to the well of living water; let us never be afraid to carry that water to the world. Jesus has given us the light of the Gospel; let us never be afraid to charge into the darkness.

Let us pray: As we prayed in the collect, Father: stir up your faithful people. Remind us of our calling. Remind us that we have an eternal hope. Remind us that you've given us your Spirit and will never leave or forsake us. Stir us up to do the work of your kingdom, even in the face of persecution, that we might have a witness spoke of by the angels in heaven. We ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.