

Tracy Daub
11/13/16--University Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

FAKERS, THE FUTURE, AND FAITH

I wasn't at all pleased when I saw the New Testament lectionary for this week. Given this week's election results that have left so many in our nation with a feeling of great anxiety, this passage from the Gospel of Luke depicting a catastrophic future just didn't seem like the right message. On the other hand, could there be an important message in this passage for us as we deal with a nation that is anxious about its present and its future? It's worth giving the Gospel of Luke a second look.

It is quite likely that Jesus' words about anticipated violence and societal upheaval, about wars and hardships, about the persecution and arrest of his followers, about their betrayal by family and friends, it is quite likely that these words by Jesus were not read by Luke's audience as a description of things to come, but as a description of what they were *already* experiencing. By the time Luke's gospel was written, the early followers of Jesus were already experiencing persecution. They had already been rejected by their synagogues, communities, even family members. The vast and beautiful Temple which Jesus in this passage predicts will be destroyed, would have already by the time of Luke's writing been reduced to rubble by the Roman oppressors after the Jewish uprising in the year 70. And the Roman retaliation for this uprising not only destroyed the Temple, but was unleashed on all of Jerusalem, destroying homes, slaughtering its citizens, and thoroughly crushing the people. So, Jesus' words that seem like such a scary prediction were probably already a present day reality for those Luke was writing to. These early Christians already knew great social suffering. They already knew the cost that came from following the Way of Jesus.

Thus, it is likely that Luke's readers heard these words of Jesus as an encouragement to them in their time of adversity and an encouragement for them to remain strong to the Way of Jesus. Jesus tells his followers that in these anticipated hardships and trials, his disciples will have an opportunity to bear witness to the Way of Jesus.

Jesus knows that it is in times of adversity when it is especially important that the Way of Jesus be given voice and proclaimed. Because you see, there can be other voices that will fill the spaces, other voices claiming to be speaking the truth--but who are in fact fakers and frauds. Jesus tells us today, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and 'The time is near!' Do not go after them," Jesus warns us. There have always been and there still exists today, those people who wear the label "Christian," who claim to be followers of Christ, but who do not really profess the truth of Christ. Jesus knows that such people can lead his followers astray with their false truths, particularly when times are hard. Don't be fooled, he warns us.

But how are we to tell the difference? How can we tell fools' gold from the real thing? Well, we can turn to examples right within Luke's own gospel to help us see the difference between the truth of Jesus, the Way of Jesus, and those claiming to be followers of Christ but who are in fact purveyors of falsehoods.

In contrast to those who call us to reserve our compassion for those who "deserve it", for those we approve of, Jesus reached out with love to outcasts, foreigners, women, enemies, and people who had made all manner of mistakes. Jesus never said to any stranger, to any outcast, to any enemy, "I'm sorry, I can't help you because my people have a policy against your people." Instead, he offered compassion, mercy, and grace to everyone.

In contrast to those who seek to reward people in power, to give advantages to those people already at the top, to enhance the wealthy people's abilities to amass more wealth, to praise the wealthy as good and treat the poor and vulnerable as if they were bad, Jesus proclaimed a great reversal, more than once in the Gospel of Luke, in which the poor, the hungry, the oppressed are lifted up and the wealthy and powerful are brought low. True greatness, he said, is found in service and humility.

In contrast to those in society who would have us believe that greed is good and amassing vast wealth our right, Jesus tells us in Luke not to store up riches on earth, and that it is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

In contrast to voices promoting hatred and fear and rejection of others, who would have us believe that some people do not deserve our attention or care: the refugee, the immigrant, the person on welfare, the gay, the lesbian, the transgendered person, the African American youth, the Muslim man or woman, Luke gives us Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, a story in which a traveler offers radical compassion to a man of an enemy social group.

In contrast to those who call us to seek revenge, strike back against our enemy, Luke gives us Jesus' radical words: "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

In contrast to those who would condemn or judge others or who would harbor grudges, Jesus tells us not to judge and to forgive one another.

Can you see how the Way of Jesus puts his followers at odds with their world? Chapter after chapter, story after story, Luke's gospel delivers a radical message of love, mercy, and justice. To live this way is to be counter-cultural. That is why the Way of Jesus incited so much

opposition and brought hostilities upon his followers. The Way of Jesus challenged their communities, their families, their government.

Christians are not destined to be celebrated in any social order--not even in the best of democracies--not when we are truly living out the Way of Jesus. What Christians believe about power, about compassion, about justice, about equality, will put us into conflict with most structures of power. Our truth challenges the false truths of this world. Jesus encouraged his followers to use the time of hardship to bear testimony to the truths he had been teaching them.

This Friday, I drove Abby and her friend to Seneca Falls to visit the Women's Rights Museum and the Women's Hall of Fame. She and a group of her classmates are doing a project on women who take a stand, so I offered to take any of her group as could go to visit the historic community of Seneca Falls on the Veteran's Day holiday. Visiting Seneca Falls brought to my attention again the life of Susan B. Anthony. She gave her entire life to the anti-slavery and the women's rights movements. She firmly believed in the dignity and equality of all people, regardless of race or gender. Her efforts to advocate for these truths got her laughed at, ridiculed, scorned, threatened, and even arrested when she exercised her right to vote. Susan B. Anthony never even lived to see her efforts on behalf of women become law--for she died well before the 1920 passage of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote. But in all that adversity, Anthony clung to the truth, the truth that was deeply embedded in her Christian faith.

In this present time when so many people in our nation feel terribly vulnerable and anxious, it is essential that there are voices today who bear witness to the truth of Jesus Christ. At a time when there are people in positions of power who may wear the label Christian but who speak false truths, it is essential that we bear testimony to the Way of Jesus Christ. We are called

to bear testimony through our lives, to bear testimony with our words, to bear testimony with our actions.

To be a Christian does not mean subscribing to a rigid set of doctrines or rules. To be a Christian does not mean getting in our nice clothes and sitting in church for one hour a week. To be a Christian does not mean uttering some set formula of words and thinking that will get you into heaven. To be a Christian means to follow Jesus in the Way of radical love, grace, compassion, and justice. If you don't believe me, just read the gospels. It's all there.

This world needs to hear and see that testimony. Our nation needs to see and hear that testimony. And there are people in our nation who need us to raise our voices on their behalf. Whatever happens in our future, *whoever* comes into positions of power in our future, whatever takes place on the national or global scene in our future, our one task in life is to be faithful to the Way of Jesus Christ.

The prophet Isaiah today helps to balance this conversation about our troubling future with his beautiful words of hope. Isaiah offers us a vision of the world as it will be when God remakes it. We hear about the new heaven and the new earth God will bring about when wolf and lamb shall lie down together, when there will be no more infant mortality, no more laboring in vain, no more weeping and distress, no more calamities. We are given a vision of a beautiful world of hope, prosperity, peace, and long life.

This vision is not a day dream. It's not the kind of pie in the sky thinking about what God will one day do for us. I think of this vision as something like Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech because it offers us a hopeful vision of what reality can be like when all of us are participants with God. As we contemplate our future, we are invited to live into and to live out

Isaiah's vision. We are invited to become companions with God in walking the Way of Jesus so that *all* of us can anticipate a future without fear.