

Sermon 11 April 2010

Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

*We must obey God rather than men and women... We are witnesses to these things.*

**Witnessing, seeing, believing.**

Pray with me: May the words of my mouth and all of our thoughts be acceptable to God, whose loving embrace encircles us all. Amen.

A story from Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, where I grew up goes like this...

A little church needs a new minister. After a fruitless search, the bishop finally appoints one... a woman. Not only is she the first woman to serve this rural church, she is the first female pastor in all the valley!

Two of the deacons of the church, deacons who know their Bible—well, sort of--elders who can cite chapter and verse of Paul's letter where he writes, "Women shall keep silent in church (1Cor. 14:34-35)," these deacons invite their new woman pastor fishing. They want to scrutinize her in the close quarters of their bass boat.

The new pastor agrees, but she is no fool. Her conference minister has appointed her knowing her strength of faith and her ministerial gifts: brilliant preacher, able administrator, charismatic evangelist. She knows that she will be under the deacons' microscope on this fishing trip.

"We go fishing early," says Deacon Earl. Deacon Ned nods in agreement.

"Fine, fine," says the new pastor. "The fish feast on flies when the water lies calm in the early morning. But," she says, "I have a very important meeting in town at eleven. I need to return before then."

"Eleven?" says Deacon Ned, "We will be finished long before eleven. We promise we will have you back before eleven."

Early morning, with her fishing gear in hand, the minister awaits the Deacons at the lakeside. They arrive, launch the boat and head for their favourite fishing hole.

Now, the deacons' egos are not assuaged when they discover that, not only can their new minister preach like Gideon, but she seems to know where the bass lurk, the way Jesus knew where the fish lay when he instructed his disciples to cast on the other side of the boat. Every time she casts her line she reels in another lunker.

The time arrives for the minister to go ashore for her meeting. She reminds the deacons. Feeling pretty ornery about being skunked fishing—looking at their empty buckets-- they reply to her, “Sorry, we never return until we catch something. We will have to stay longer!”

Imagine her surprise as her church deacons break their promise. Seeing they intend to stay, she takes off her shoes and gathers her tackle. The deacons pause in their fishing to look at her. She stands and stares across the expanse of lake between the boat and the shore. She closes her eyes and bows her head.

The deacons chuckle and smirk at her distress. Ned leans over to Earl and says, “Well, she only has herself to blame, a woman trying to be a minister.”

Then she lifts one foot over the side of the boat. She tests the water with her toe. Boldly, she steps out of the boat. The deacons' jaws drop, as they watch her walk across the water. Only her feet get wet. Once ashore she turns and gives a little wave before driving off.

Deacon Ned recovers from his astonishment first. “Can you believe your eyes Earl? Would you look at that!” She does not even know how to swim!” *Pause...*

Change. Change means something new. Something new means the unknown. The unknown, by definition, means ignorance. Too often ignorance leads to fear. Fear leads to hatred.

Today we remember Hitler's Concentration Camps, the means of the Holocaust horrors which epitomise Twentieth Century ignorance, fear and hatred. No one knows how many people died in Hitler's concentration camps, but a low estimate is six million Jews *and* six million others, 12 million men, women and children. As our Mission

Moment mentioned, among those “others” were: Gypsies, the handicapped, homosexuals.

When Allied armies liberate the first concentration camps in April 1945, General Eisenhower understands that many people will be unable to comprehend the full scope of the horror. He understands that any human deeds so utterly evil might eventually be challenged or even denied as being, literally, unbelievable.

For these reasons Eisenhower orders that all the civilian news media and military combat camera units be required to visit the camps and record their observations in print, pictures and film. As Eisenhower explains to General George Marshall, quote: “I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in a position to give first-hand evidence... if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these events as mere 'propaganda.'”\*

One concentration camp inmate remembers the words of another, “First they came for the Communists and I did not speak up, because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak up, because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Catholics, and I did not speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up for me.”

Martin Niemoller who penned these words was a decorated World War I U-Boat commander. After the first war, Niemoller became a Lutheran pastor and a critic of the Nazis. In 1938, before the start of World War II, Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess had Niemoller -- a minister, a German war hero -- thrown into a concentration camp. Niemoller survived seven years in the camps.

Niemoller's remembering encourages us to face our fears, not to cloak them in ignorance or hatred. Niemoller prods us to have the courage of our convictions, to live out the words that Peter and the Apostles preach and proclaim: He is risen! Jesus is Lord. Jesus lives and reigns in our hearts and determines our actions. We are the hands and feet of God.

We remain silent in the face of evil at our own peril. If Caesar and the empire can deprive the liberty and life of anyone they declare to be a deviant, an outsider, anyone marginalized, any enemy... really friends, how far away is that from you and me being declared deviants, undesirables, an enemy?

This past week the church's website received an anonymous posting. I would like to share parts of it with you now, with names removed:

*Having grown up in the original little white Kirkland Congregational Church during Rev. George Helliwell's reign, I have to express my disappointment .... Many original church members do not embrace homosexuality as normal. I see now your affiliation of Progressive Christianity has changed many original values and beliefs of the church. Look at the surprize on the faces of your congregation when you introduce [the new minister and his spouse.] I, for one, will not be present. My husband and I were married in this church when marriage was defined as a sacred bond between a man and a woman, as it has been for thousands of years as witnessed in The Bible. In my opinion, political correctness and progressivism has ruined this country and has now ruined my home church.*

We remain silent in the face of evil at our own peril. This church faces a decision. May your decision be based on your own knowledge—not ignorance and fear. Based on your confidence in the wisdom and trust of our search committee. And based on your own discernment of the candidate being presented to you next week.

Let God's radical embrace not be in vain. Jesus' resurrection and life offer radical hospitality to all. No one is excluded. Concentration camps constructed for no one. Apartheid homelands created for no one. As President Reagan once challenged Mikhail Gorbachev, we are challenged to “Tear down these walls!” Dividing walls erected for no one.

Like Dr. King, I have a dream, that one day a person will not be judged by the

way God created them, not by colour of their skin, not by their sex as the pastor of that Virginia church was. I have a dream that a person will not be judged by their sexual orientation, or by those they love and marry, or by any other identifying quality that marks a difference between me and another. Rather they will be judged by the content of their character.

In the words of our hymn, “The walls of gold entomb us, the swords of scorn divide; Take not your thunder from us, but take away our pride.” May the love of God have the last word. Amen.

Pray with me:

God, we thank you that your love is bigger than our sin. Continue to shepherd us, pulling us back toward your loving embrace, challenging us to embrace those we would rather not. Use our hands and feet and voices to build your Kin-dom of welcome and grace, rather than build dividing walls of fear and hate. Forgive our smallness of mind, and open us to the refreshing wideness of your welcome. Bless and guide this congregation that we love. Amen.

*\*(from the Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial Commission. Orhdruf and Buchenwald were the first camps Eisenhower visited)*