

Proper 15-C
August 15, 2010
St. Stephen's, Spokane

I spent a couple of weekends in June helping to lead a workshop on preaching for folks in the diocese who were in the ordination process or preparing to be licensed as preachers in their congregations. There was a lot of information that was shared in those days, but if there were one point that came through again and again it was this: Where is the good news in what you are preaching?

I looked at today's lessons this week with that in mind, and it was a challenge. Jeremiah referred to God's word as a fire or a hammer. Tough stuff. We heard a rather sharp discourse in which Jesus (who has set his face toward Jerusalem) announces that he has not come to bring peace to the earth, but division. That sometimes families will even be ripped apart over their religious choices – their loyalties. So much for family values!

I don't know about you, but I'm kind of a "peace on earth" person. Discord and division are hard. And now we have to find the good news in the midst of this gritty and somewhat gloomy passage.

It's all the harder if our sense of good news is tied up entirely in having harmony, happiness and sort of a cozy warmth. This most assuredly will not work here. The baseline for good news is, of course, that Jesus' presence – whether comforting or challenging – is good news. He is present. He brings the message of the kingdom.

And maybe here part of the good news is that Jesus comes with an urgency – with a message that we are to take to heart. A message that is so important that it is even

worth the risk of damaging family relationships or disrupting friendships. It truly is the urgent message of the reign of God. It deserves our single-minded attention. Our undivided loyalty.

Most of us I would guess experience church as a pretty mild and gentle place most of the time. When I ask vestries what their hopes are for their congregations, they often say they want their parish to be warm, welcoming, inviting and nurturing. We could all agree that these are all good things to be – especially if that welcome is genuine and deep enough to include everyone who might walk through the front door. No one wants to be a part of an unwelcoming community. Welcome and hospitality are signs of the kingdom of God.

But I also notice the ways that we sometimes shy away from any commitment to the riskier stuff of the reign of God. I see a lot of parish profiles from all over the country in my job as transitions minister. Often mission statements are crafted in ways that almost disguise our passion for the gospel. Sometimes those mission statements simply see a congregation's reason for existence as being a "warm community" or an "Episcopal presence" in a town.

Sometimes I ask, "What does that have to do with the gospel? Where is the urgency? Where is the passion?"

Sometimes, though, the passion emerges. The urgency emerges. Something wakes us up. Nudges our souls. Converts our hearts. Annie Dillard in an essay once remarked that when churches are really hearing the gospel that ladies shouldn't be wearing those fancy hats with wide brims. Crash helmets would be more appropriate. With the passion comes some risk.

Sometimes congregations are willing to take that passionate, risky, path and have learned to live with the consequences. Goodness knows that Episcopal churches here and elsewhere have seen people leave over a decision that seemed to many to be faithful to the gospel.

I'm sure some of you remember when St. Ann's Catholic Church here in Spokane decided back in the 1980s to offer hospitality to a family fleeing El Salvador in the midst of civil war there. This family had suffered deeply. The father had been killed and they had to flee for fear of continuing violence. When they worked their way north they lived as a sanctuary family – as illegal aliens— in the church basement for some time. The church had expected just the mother and children, but other members of the family came, too and there were eight or nine people.

This was a tremendous risk for the church to take. There were legal issues; immigration issues; church issues. Certainly their choice was not embraced by all of Spokane or even all of their congregation. A few families left. But the ones who stayed and who worked to furnish hospitality knew that it was a compassionate thing to do—a right thing to do and that it is what they really thought Jesus would have them do. It was a gritty, risky response to the gospel.

The family, by the way, is still in Spokane – but no longer living in the church basement. The children have grown up, gone to college, married, started families, become part of the Spokane community as well as the parish community. I wonder what would have happened to them if that church had not decided to take a risk.

You may remember the controversy that surrounded that choice to provide hospitality. It was a political hot potato. A challenge to the wider church community. But it was their single-minded response to the gospel call for justice.

Sometimes that passion emerges in the life of an individual. If you read the lives of the saints you'll often find some real tension, some family discord as individuals do what they can to respond to the call of Jesus.

Eight hundred years ago, a knight named Francesco Bernadone, was fighting the wars with Perugia but also spending a lot of time at church praying. As time went on, he was convinced that the soldier's life was not for him. He wanted nothing more than to be a disciple of Christ. This man, who we have come to know as St. Francis of Assisi, wanted to serve the poorest of the poor.

He decided to follow Jesus' words in scripture – sell all you have and give it to the poor and he did just that. His father, however, was not pleased at this choice. After all, a lot of what Francis had – and what he chose to give away -- really belonged to his father. His father had him thrown into jail. Francis' zeal to follow Jesus had turned his father against him. The pain must have been immense and very real as they tried to sort out their relationship and his new and very different vocation. It was no longer business as usual. Francis had an urgency. A passion for the gospel that was worth the risk of alienating his family.

Of course the rest is history. Francis is one of the best known saints of the church – one whose own example of integrity and compassion has been a model for ministry. But it did not come without a personal price.

In both our contemporary example of St. Ann's parish and our historic example of St. Francis, we can see people going through a rough patch on their way to serving Jesus in the way they felt called to do that. They entered into a risky place because, for the sake of the gospel and their own integrity, they HAD to.

Sometimes major shifts occur in our lives when we choose to follow Jesus. One author, commenting on this passage, said that it's a bit like inviting an interior designer in to recommend a new paint color and then finding out that you have to tear all the walls down and re-arrange the entire space.

Most of us don't plan on cataclysmic change in our lives. But it can happen. It can happen when we hear clearly the call of the gospel.

Several years ago Bishop Waggoner gave each of us on his staff a small, silver medal engraved with the letters, WWJD – for What would Jesus do? That's not a bad thing to ask ourselves when we're confronted by hard choices. I'm sure the people at St. Ann's asked a version of that question as they opened their church and their hearts to the Orellana family 20 years ago. I'm sure St. Francis asked that question as he risked the disapproval of his father.

Where's the good news here? The good news is that Jesus came among us to be, as our collect reminds us, both a sacrifice for sin and an example of godly life. May our lives reflect his example and may we learn to be risk-takers for the sake of his gospel.