

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, January 31, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Luke 4:21-30
"My words in your mouth"

Somewhere in my files I have a cartoon that I tried to find to include in today's bulletin. But I couldn't find it, so you will just have to imagine it as I describe it to you.

It's a single panel, and it shows a minister standing in the pulpit of his church. He is wearing an overcoat and a hat, and round the foot of the pulpit are several suitcases. Through a window behind the pulpit, a taxi can be seen sitting waiting, with its door open and the engine running. The minister is beginning his sermon with these words: "My sermon this morning is one I have wanted to preach for some time now."

Everyone loves the kind of sermon that they can describe as good news - lower case g, lower case n, as distinct from the Good News of the Gospel - upper case G, upper case N. Everyone loves the kind of sermon that encourages us and affirms us and comforts us and tells us what a great job we are doing for Christ and for his kingdom. What's not to like about that kind of sermon? They give us all the warm fuzzies and make us feel good about ourselves and the church and our level of commitment and the way we are doing things.

But I don't believe that every sermon can be like that, or should be like that. What about the sermons that rebuke us, and challenge us, and humble us, and point out what we are not doing well, and show us how we need to straighten up and fly right? Sometimes the Word of the Lord really does cut like a two-edged sword. And sometimes sermons must cut that way too.

And what about sermons that force us to face new things, and to consider change, and to step out of our safe, familiar comfort zone? What about sermons that cause us to rethink what we believe, or maybe even think for the very first time about what we believe and why we believe it? Because sometimes sermons must cut that way too.

This is not one of those sermons. At least, it's not my intention to force something new and different on you. But I may make you a bit uncomfortable with what I say. Bear with me: I hope we can get through it together.

I have told you before that last year's General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada received a number of requests to look again at the leadership opportunities in our Church that are open to members of the LGBTQ community - the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer community. General Assembly has invited the Church at large "to engage in a year of prayerful conversation, discernment and Bible study on the topics of human sexuality, sexual orientation and other matters." I am not going to get into the matter today, because a sermon - or even a series of sermons - is almost certainly not the best way to go about things.

But what I will get into is how we respond to one another when we hear things that maybe we

do not like to hear, or things that make us uncomfortable, or things that bring us face to face with the fact that we may not agree with our sisters and brothers in Christ on some matters.

Think about how the people in Nazareth responded to what Jesus said. He had started out by saying that Scripture had just been fulfilled in their hearing that day. And they were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.

But then he went on to talk about prophets not being accepted in their home town. And he reminded them how Elijah was sent to help, not the widows of Israel, but a widow in Zarephath in Sidon, and how the only leper cleansed in the time of Elisha was not from Israel, but Naaman the Syrian. And how did the people in Nazareth respond to that? . . . *all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff* Luke 24:28-30. That's one way to respond to a sermon, thankfully one that I have not had to face. Not yet, anyway.

It's all about how we respond to differences and new things. It's all about how we respond when the Spirit of God moves and touches us. It's all about how we respond to the grace and truth that we encounter in the Word of God. And it's all about what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ, part of the community of God's people, part of the body of Christ in heaven and on earth.

In the December 23, 2015, issue of the Christian Century, there was an article written by Nicole Chivis. She is a minister of the Presbyterian Church USA, and she wrote about a visit she made to the church - not a Presbyterian church - in which she grew up. The title of the article is Humble Connections - Staying in Challenging Relationships. I want to read part of that article - actually quite a long chunk of that article - to close. It talks about how we respond to differences. This is what Chivis writes:

On a recent trip to Atlanta to visit my parents, I attended my childhood church with them. This congregation, which has grown in the past 30 years to about 3,000 people, doesn't allow women to preach, serve communion, or serve on the vestry.

I haven't lived in Atlanta since I graduated from high school. Since then, I have graduated from seminary and become a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Each time I sit in the pews of my old church, however, my emotions are roiled.

On this particular Sunday, a young man stood up to lead prayer. He asked God for forgiveness for "killing our babies and calling it choice," "divorcing and calling it convenience," and "defacing marriage and calling it equality."

. . . I followed the service with a measure of compassion until 15 men — and only men — stood up to serve communion. I couldn't deny my hurt and frustration — or my inclination to become an apologist for my own beliefs. I wanted to build a wall so I wouldn't have to see or hear those men. But I also thought of my parents sitting beside me, my positive memories of growing up in this church, my hope for unity in the body of Christ.

At the end of the service, my mother asked me to come with her to greet the pastor and his wife. Somewhat reluctantly, I did. They hugged me, talked with me, and promised to continue praying for me and my family. The hugs, smiles, and interest were genuine, born out of years of relationship.

In that moment, I realized why I keep coming back. Despite our differences, I love these people. They care deeply about my parents. It is precisely that love that allows me, maybe even compels me, to return to this place and to grapple with feelings of personal rejection regarding this church's stance on women in ministry.

After my recent visit to my parents' church, I wrote to the pastor and shared my views. I knew it would change our relationship. He was a significant part of my faith formation; he wrote a recommendation for me to go to seminary.

The pastor responded, assuring me of his deep love for me and my family. He thanked me for my candour while holding fast to his beliefs. He said he was doing the best he could to follow God's word sincerely.

That pastor and I fundamentally disagree about an issue, but we are in dialogue, and for that I am grateful. I thank God for my courage to be honest about my beliefs and experience of God's call in my life. I thank God for this pastor's willingness to engage with me. I believe in the ultimate mystery of a God who finally will heal every broken place in our hearts and in the world. Who knows, maybe one day, through prayer and conversation, this pastor and I will slowly see the tension find resolution.

So I will continue to sit in those pews when I make my yearly journeys to the place of my youth. I will sing, pray, worship, delight in, and grapple with the culture that played a part in forming me. I will do so because of a deep and abiding hope that if we are faithful and committed to staying in relationship, living in the tension, Christ will show up with a healing love for us that may even reach the ends of the earth.