

SERMON: The Living, Piercing Word of God

TEXT: Hebrews 4:12-16

I remember when I was the last one at home living with my mom, every time she finished talking to my brother on the phone she would complain about him. But her complaints were not about anything you might imagine she'd be upset with regarding her son. What frustrated her quite often was what she might call his darn positive attitude.

You see, my mom was kind of a complainer. She often had lots of complaints – about her health, primarily – and my brother was a firm believer that a positive attitude would make her feel better. Well, she didn't want to hear it. True as it might be, his advice was unsolicited. She didn't want advice, she just wanted someone to listen and maybe share a brief word of word compassion and comfort. Just a little bit of “aw, poor baby,” can go a long way.

Sometimes I feel the same way about the Bible. Sometimes, just when I'm looking for words of comfort or affirmation, what I get instead is something like today's gospel lesson with Jesus telling the rich man, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come follow me.”

When I was preparing to write the sermon for last Sunday, the gospel lesson from the lectionary began with the Pharisees asking Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” Ugh. It’s been less than 18 months since my divorce, and it was the most difficult and painful thing I’ve ever endured. So, frankly, I don’t particularly want to discuss what the Bible says about it, much less preach on it. Maybe I need to hear it; maybe I need to struggle with it, but right now it hits a little too close to home, and it’s just too hard.

I’m guessing that many of the people living in the area of Mexico Beach, Florida – the town that was devastated by Hurricane Michael – would not be interested in hearing the story about Jesus calming the storm at this point in time. Because, you know, he didn’t calm this one.

After Jesus told the rich man to sell everything and give to the poor, the man “went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” You see, the word of God is not always compassionate and comforting. Sometimes, it stings. Sometimes, it’s hard. As Jesus then told the disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” Even if you don’t consider yourself a wealthy person, nobody wants to face the challenge of giving up all their possessions. Nobody wants to hear how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God.

“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” The writer of Hebrews tells it like it is. He even takes this point to a place I’d prefer to avoid: “And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.” Naked before God, all our secrets are revealed.

Several of my Facebook friends are people I went to seminary with, and now they are colleagues in ministry. One of them posed a question that had confronted him in his morning devotion: *If you were arrested and put on trial for being a devoted follower of Christ, would there be enough evidence to convict you?* My friend confessed that this “difficult and troubling question” made him squirm with discomfort. “Good grief,” he said. “I just wanted to ease into the day.” I sensed it had pierced his heart and soul like a two-edged sword.

One contemporary theologian commented on this passage: “For the writer of Hebrews, the word of God is ‘living and active’ – probing, slicing, carving the [everyday, ordinary] rhythms of our lives, refining us with a spirit and a wisdom that is fresh and alive. It is as if spiritual surgery were being performed daily – reforming us and always calling us to be reformed.... If we do not keep our own

Bibles open, our own hearts unlocked, our own minds ready for God's deft sword, we may miss that liberating moment when the dis-ease of our life is cut away by the healing wisdom of a living word." (Susan R. Andrews, Hebrews 4:12-16, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4)

Many years ago when I was looking for my first church to serve, I read the information form from one church that indicated, "We want a preacher whose sermons keep us awake on Sunday morning and help us sleep on Sunday night." I will agree that *sometimes* the scriptures do provide a feeling of peace and rest. But, there are also many times when the word of God – and my interpretation of it – *ought to* keep us awake at night. We are not meant to walk out of here and forget everything we heard and go back to living our easy, privileged lives. The word of God often convicts us about where we have fallen away from the path of discipleship, and calls us to be transformed. As much as we'd like to be comfortable and confident that we are living a faithful and obedient life, the word of God continues to both challenge and convict us.

It is a living word. We know that because we're still learning from it over two thousand years after it was written. The world we live in today is certainly

worlds away from the context in which the scriptures were written. And yet, it still speaks to us; it is still relevant; it still applies to our lives here and now.

It is a piercing word. Earlier I described it as *hitting too close to home*. An elderly woman I knew in Springfield would occasionally comment to me about my sermon, saying “now you’re just meddling.” She was only half-joking, as she admitted that my preaching was hitting too close to home; she felt as if I were speaking directly to her and her own situation without even knowing what it was. Well, that wasn’t me; that was the Holy Spirit piercing her heart with that double-edged sword.

Sometimes, whether we like it or not, **THE LIVING, PIERCING WORD OF GOD** speaks directly – not only to us in our personal lives – but to the world we live in and the issues of the day. **THE LIVING, PIERCING WORD OF GOD** convicts us of where we have strayed from the path of discipleship. **THE LIVING, PIERCING WORD OF GOD** challenges us to confess, to repent, and to change. And it’s hard.

Perhaps you’ve heard the story about the woman who visited a silversmith to watch him work. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver

in the middle of the fire where it is hottest, in order to burn away all the impurities. It has to be watched closely because if it is left there too long, it will be destroyed. The woman questioned, how do you know when it's ready, when it's fully refined? The silversmith answered, "When I see my image in it." Of course, we are the silver and God is the silversmith, refining us until we reflect God's image.

But there is also a word of grace, as there always is with the word of God. The passage in Hebrews goes on to remind us that we have a *great high priest*: Jesus, who sympathizes with our weaknesses, who has also been tested, and who will greet us at the throne of grace to give us mercy, grace, and help in time of need.

So, back to that question my seminary friend posted on Facebook: *If you were arrested and put on trial for being a devoted follower of Christ, would there be enough evidence to convict you?* In the midst of his troubled pondering, another of our seminary friends answered with a word of grace, "It's a trick question. The actual evidence is Christ's devotion to you."

May THE LIVING, PIERCING WORD OF GOD speak to us today. May we recognize where it applies to our lives and our world. May we hold fast to our

confession when our thoughts and the intentions of our hearts are judged. May we allow ourselves to be transformed. And may we “approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive [Christ’s] mercy and find grace to help in time of need”... to the glory of God!

AMEN.