

We do talk a lot about how the call to follow Jesus is a call to a different kind of life. Service, compassion and a focus on the things of God. Dying to self, and living for glory; and let's not forget that infamous idea from the gospel of John - 'ye must be born again!' These are the phrases the church has developed to explain what it means to be Christian. It's language that only makes sense to those 'on the inside'; a secret language of salvation that lets the righteous smile and is meant to make the sinner tremble. These phrases, and the mindset that goes with them are all a part of who we are as the congregation of St. John's Presbyterian church. And if we're being honest, we like being insiders. It's comfortable. It feels safe. It's one less thing to worry about.

The church has been our teacher - our counsellor - our safe haven for centuries. Through the history of the church, we discover what it means to serve. Under the guidance of the church, we are taught the basics of faith. The church has translated and interpreted Scripture for us. The traditions and history of the church are a gift (most of the time). The church - the institutional, hierarchical church has been a factor in secular history too - giving us ideas about government, and exploration and settlement that have dangerous implications for the lives of so many. The church influenced the slave trade, and declared that indigenous peoples around the globe were nothing more than obstacles to white, Christian progress. We are still learning the lessons and finding our way towards repentance.

We know our history (and if we don't, we should). We know that the church is (and has been) a flawed but well meaning interpreter of the faith. And in the current climate of apathy and anxiety, it is fair to say that we would benefit from the kind of wisdom we imagine the church should be able to provide. But this morning we get to listen to Jesus.

Sure, it's Jesus from a distance - Jesus through the lens of history - Jesus interpreted by the earliest form of the church - Jesus 'second hand' via the gospel of Luke, 60 or 70 years after the fact. But this is Jesus, nonetheless. And Jesus calls for a change of perspective. Jesus does not build walls between the church and the world; Jesus offers words that seem like dangerous nonsense:

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hurt you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

These are troubling words in an era of clergy as sexual abusers and violently partisan politics. We have misappropriated these words, and insisted that the abused should pour piety on their wounds. We have endangered our most

vulnerable by insisting they “turn the other cheek” or “go the extra mile.” But in a world where the church has created more enemies than friends, maybe these are the words of wisdom we need.

Loving enemies and praying for those who hurt us doesn’t feel comfortable or safe. But safety is for sinners. Comfort leads to dangerously arrogant decisions. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that...

Jesus words should challenge us. The crucifixion was a horror show, and the resurrection a miraculous new beginning, but neither event solved any of our very human problems. Jesus knew that living into an attitude of love was counterintuitive. We’re built for competition - often enough our survival demands it. But God’s desire has always been for more than just our survival. “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11) Our welfare is God’s concern...and the gift of a future with hope requires not just faith, but a new attitude.

Jesus calls us out of our comfort zone because that is where mercy is real - that is where God stands ready and waiting. The church can be a sanctuary - but make no mistake; the church is not the place to hide from reality. Here we are recognized by God for what we are. Here we acknowledge that God has offered us a chance to be made new. Here we learn the lessons of Jesus life - and begin to apply them to our own. Not always a comfortable place, and we’ve discovered more than a little resistance. And just as God meets our sorrow and sin with love, Jesus invites us to face the world with love. Those who are different; those who would challenge us; those who dismiss us; those who ignore us. For in truth they are no different that we are.