

## **“With Malice Toward None”**

Psalm 91:1-10; Matthew 10:24-31

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

May 18, 2014 – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

As evidence that things aren't idyllic anywhere, there's the tragic story of a young woman who committed suicide a few years ago. She lived in one of those quaint English villages that look so enticing in films. They always seem to me like the perfect place to live.

Apparently the woman was the target of gossip and bullying, in this case of a particularly vicious kind. It carried on for some time and, in the end, she was despondent and convinced that her reputation was forever ruined. She took her life when she felt she couldn't bear the pain any longer.

A coroner's jury was convened to determine the cause of death. After examination of the evidence, and being aware of the local situation, they brought in the verdict "killed by idle gossip." By whatever means she actually committed suicide, ultimately it was the behavior of others that was real cause.

In today's gospel reading there is a line that refers to how Jesus was sometimes treated: "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul (or Prince of Darkness), how much more will they malign those of his household!" Another way of putting this would be to say that if Christ's antagonists were quick to smear his reputation, they would not be reluctant to do the same toward his followers. Indeed, that was the case.

The choice of the word "malign" in the New Revised translation is entirely appropriate. It comes from the Latin base *malus* meaning evil. This shows up in such common words as malfeasance and malpractice. To malign someone is to speak evil of him.

Jesus was often maligned. He preached that the world's priorities were askew. Money wasn't all important, nor was power or fame. These were false goals all dressed up to look like real ones. What was important, he said, was serving God and being at one with all of humanity. This was the way of inner serenity and the path to fulfillment.

Some laughed at Jesus' naïveté. How could he believe such nonsense? Anybody with half a brain knew how things were in life. It's a dog-eat-dog world. That the way it always had been. That's the way it always would be. And, besides, who did this self-declared prophet draw to himself? The riff-raff of society and women who should have been home listening to their husbands.

Still, Jesus taught on. He said that what pleases God most are deeds of love and service rather than limpid worship and token sacrifice. Particularly repugnant was anything that led people to a false or distorted religion, or which commercialized its practice—as in the case of merchants in the temple. Not surprisingly, those who were closely tied to the religious *status quo* saw Jesus to be a threat to their authority and livelihood. They would not be silent in the face of such a competitor.

Though he brought a saving word of love, by some he was soundly denounced and rejected. He stepped on powerful toes when he criticized how the rich often exploited others and the privileged, it seems, were not amused by his accusations.

Another group also had difficulty with Jesus' message: these were the hard of heart. They either were uncaring or over time had become cynical and closed to the hope of anything better from life. They may have been miserable, but they at least could take some consolation in their shared misery.

Jesus' preaching might have stirred them with its promises, except that they had already steeled themselves against such a message. They had given up. They couldn't take any further chance of getting excited about some possibility and then having it fall through. Jesus said what they so desperately wanted to hear and believe but, instead of giving themselves over to him, they braced themselves even further to withstand the temptation to consider his message. They couldn't take a chance.

When we read the Bible we're often stunned by how many rejected Christ. From what we know of human nature, perhaps we should be surprised by how many accepted him. The two most receptive groups were the spiritually sensitive and the truly poor. Both came to Jesus with open ears and hearts ready to listen.

People are essentially no different today than what they were then. We dress a little differently, are better educated overall, certainly more scientifically and technologically advanced, but the same basic motivations are still the same in people. The same type of people who rejected him back then, are the same who reject him right now. That goes as well for those who originally received him.

Jesus makes it very clear that when we continue his work we will often be misunderstood. We will get questioned about our motives. We may be accused of using others for our own benefit. If what we do is defiant enough, we will be put down directly; otherwise, rumor and lies may simply take care of it.

Nathaniel Howe once said, "The way of the world is to praise dead saints and to persecute living ones." And there's a lot of truth in it. The big difference between the 1<sup>st</sup> Century and today is that identification as a Christian in most parts of the world doesn't put a person in jeopardy, but living out that faith still does.

You recall how Mother Teresa was widely respected and admired for her work on the streets of India. If she had relocated here, identified herself with the poor and powerless in our American neighborhoods, advocated for true social change, she would likely have stirred up great opposition. Mother Teresa had such favorable standing in most places around the world precisely because she chose to stay in India. Her reputation was global, but she might have presented a threat had she been local.

Jesus tells us to expect to suffer for what you believe. Doing right often comes at a cost, but then failing to do right also has its consequences. In fact, Jesus says that when you experience resistance it may be the best indicator that you're on the right track.

One church I served had an active ministry to homeless families through the Interfaith Hospitality Network. In fact, they turned their former parsonage into a dedicated shelter. Despite the fact that residents stayed there only from supper to breakfast, that there were rarely any problems, and that church volunteers were with the residents the entire time, not everyone in the neighborhood appreciated our efforts. Some people maligned the church regularly just because we dared to reach out to the "wrong" kind of people.

Jesus offers us no defensive strategies for avoiding criticism or being ridiculed for our commitment. He does tell us, though, that God's love for us is firm and constant, especially when we reach out to the least of those among us. It's also why Jesus blessed the Church as a means of strengthening and encouraging each other in living out our faith. There is a sustaining power in true fellowship.

When one well-known person was criticized in the press his friends urged him to take counter action. In the end he declined by saying, "Half the people who read that paper never saw the article. Half who read it didn't understand it. Half who did understand it didn't believe it. And half of those who believed it were of no consequence to me anyway."

Our steady, faithful witness is the best defense we can have against criticism. It may not prevent evil words from being said, but it makes them unimportant. We get nowhere returning malice with malice.

Together in the household of faith we are sanctuary to each other and a reminder that, with each advancing step we are called to make, we come to experience God's love even more. Struggle and joy go hand in hand.