

Earlier this week, The Rt. Rev. Marian Edgar Budde, Bishop of the Diocese of Washington and overseer of the National Cathedral, earlier this week, Bishop Budde preached a sermon. It wasn't terribly exciting. It wasn't fun. I mean, it was church. She was honest and true and faithful. If you haven't watched the whole thing, that's your homework. Go and watch and judge for yourself if she was nasty or faithless or using her pulpit to berate.

For years, we've talked about things that are core to our faith. There's Jesus, obviously, at least I hope it's obvious that Jesus is at our core. There's loving God and loving neighbor. There's sorting out the truth by judging the fruits of people's actions. But one of those core lines we've heard more than a few times comes from Fr. Steve, my friend down in Chenango County. As long as I've known him, he's said, "If you think being a Christian is easy, you're doing it wrong." Some of y'all've heard me say that and pushed back which I understand. The way our nation has come to be, Christians hold a unique place in the theistic hierarchy of America. It's not one I would've chosen, but it's there nonetheless. We've become the unofficial religion of the state, and because of that aggrandized position, we've forgotten what it means to be Christian. Being Christian has come to mean getting angry over what's on somebody's coffee cup or who gets to read stories at your local library. Being Christian has come to mean outrage over fabricated slights. That's easy. It's easy to get angry over inconsequential things that come with no risk for us. We've had it so easy that we had to make up persecutions to garner attention. But y'all, it's easy to cosplay as the persecuted when you're not.

What being Christian actually means is looking to the truly persecuted and extending love, mercy, shelter, and food no matter the cost to you. Being Christian actually means visiting with the persecuted in their reality and feeling the pang of remorse as you return to the safety and comfort of your own reality. Being a Christian actually means standing between the persecuted and their oppressors, come what may, even when what may come is dangerous. Being a Christian means changing your ways when you realize you've gone astray, which means admitting you were wrong or acted out or, maybe most painful, got duped, and then taking responsibility not just for the harm you caused but also the consequences now laid at your feet. And being a Christian means doing all of this with plowshares in place of swords (or guns for that matter). That's hard, some might say naive, but that's exactly what we're called to do: embody compassion and mercy with every step.

We've also talked about how Christianity's upside-down. What I mean is that our world works in certain ways. The rich and powerful get what they want. The pursuit of wealth justifies any act. Exploitation is the obvious means to any end. The poor, the alien, the queer, the brown, the unusual, the smelly, anything out of the supposed ordinary...they're all problems. Billionaires demand deference, politicians wield cruelty, and regular people suffer. Some even say a fat pocketbook is evidence of what a good Christian you are and with that, Christianity and exploitative capitalism have become intertwined. That's how our part of the world works, and because it *does* work this way, those who benefit from it think it *should* work this way. And they've got enough money and power to try and *keep* it this way.

Actual Jesus-following Christianity, though, is upside-down because it says power and wealth and being normal shouldn't matter. They do, but they shouldn't because the measure of a Christian is in doing kindness, acting with mercy, and seeking justice, not in expanding a pocketbook or collecting powerful friends. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoners, tend to the sick, you've heard this. Those aren't suggestions. Those are mandates. There's a great line that takes it a little further. It says, "The only way to get into Heaven is with a letter of recommendation from the poor." But the world as it is outlaws feeding the hungry, preys on illness, deports the alien in our land, and on and on. You know all too well how the world is broken, God knows we're

all getting more familiar with that by the day. But Christianity is broken, too. Some are only realizing this for the first time now, some can't see it yet, but many of us have seen it for a long time. A caricature of Christianity has aligned itself with hate, cruelty, disdain, and ever-growing dangers. And now a bishop of our church receives calls for deportation and death threats simply for preaching the Gospel. And she did it just like the long line of prophets all the way up to Jesus himself did it. She had the conviction to speak truth to power. She did it with a great love for those she sought mercy for. And she did it without concern for her own self-preservation. Y'all, that's as Christian as Christian witness gets.

Look at the reactions preaching the gentle guidance of Jesus has garnered. Sure, there's condemnation, threats, fear. But there's also been conversion. I don't even mean conversion just to get folks in pews. I mean conversion of hearts. I saw a comment section -- not exactly the place to go to find hope in humanity -- I saw a comment section full of people saying things like, "I've always been distrustful of religion, but if this is what religion is, sign me up" or "I'm an atheist, but sermons like hers make me appreciate Christians that actually act like Christ." Upside-down mercy and compassion with the guts to beg for sweeter fruits for everyone, it's world-altering and it gives hope where there was none before. We don't claim we're already there or that no one else is capable of doing this, but we do commit to it. In our baptisms, we prioritize mercy, respect, and the dignity of every human being. To paraphrase the section of the Gospel of Matthew that the bishop quoted, "the crowds were astounded at her teaching." Bp. Budde astounded the world with grace and the message of Christ. And now it's our turn.

In that passage from Nehemiah, there's something kind of beautiful going on. After half a century in exile, the people return to find little more than ruins. They know they need to rebuild, but before they can muster the motivation, a prophet stands on the rubble and reads the words of their faith. They weep at the sound of good news and reassurance, and then they feast. But they don't just feast, they remember the poor for whom nothing was prepared, and they feast with them, too. They're literally standing in the rubble of what their once-great city used to be and still their minds go to those in the greatest need. Over in Corinth, Paul says we're all one great human body, and if any part of this body suffers, the entire body suffers. If you're sitting here this morning, you are fortunate and your body is hurting whether you realize it or not. Many parts hurt right now, and we're connected, with sinew and bone and muscle and heart through every piece of this aching human body. And because of their pain, we've got upside-down work to do.

But what can we do? Have y'all heard the idea of "mutual aid?" If you haven't, it's all about supporting individuals by supporting your community, knowing what your gifts are, and figuring out how you can use those to contribute. It's not one-to-one barter or a direct exchange of this for that. It's supporting your community with your gifts. And that can be just about anything. Don't think you can do much but you know how to knit? Make hats and gloves and cozy socks. Know how to cook? Make a big pot of soup and freeze individual servings, or if you know where people are gathering, take it hot and steaming straight to 'em. Know how to shovel snow? Clear sidewalks. Got an old camping cot? Maybe you wanna keep it in your basement with a set of warm blankets at the ready. Don't be discouraged if you think your gift isn't dramatic enough. We're not all bishops in the nation's capital, but we need hearts and bellies and crow's feet and dentures and bum knees and, after the Autumn we've had, even a whole slew of messed up wrists. We need every part to keep this body whole, and we need every part to keep this body living with stubbornness and the faith to sustain us in a world that sees empathy as sin and compassion as treason.

Jesus says he's come to bring release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free, to bring good news to the poor. Now, I've been a little poor, and I remember what good news sounded like. Good news sounded like that one weekend mom checked out a camcorder from the library so we could make home videos. Good news sounded like a brand new sweater on sale enough that I wouldn't have to wear a sister's hand-me-down and face

the cruel scrutiny of my classmates. Good news was the occasional non-stale loaf at the Day Old Bread Store. Good news didn't sound like handouts; it sounded like a break from fighting against everything. Do y'all know what happened after Jesus said all those wild, Jesus-y things? The crowd got so angry they ran him out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff. Preaching and living this upside-down life is dangerous. And for what it's worth, good news isn't good because you like it. It's good because it brings relief to other people, especially the ones that need it the most. You can watch deportations and call it good news. You can see children targeted in schools, an active increase in the number of captives, cruelty rejoicing in others' pain, faces scoffing at the gentle Word of God, you can see all that and call it good, but calling it good doesn't make it so. We know what's good by their fruits.

Instead, when you judge the actions of this world, use Christ's fruits as your guide. Is it merciful? Is it loving? Is it peaceful and gentle and just? Does it promote empathy and compassion and self-sacrifice? Does it move you to love your neighbor? I have no illusions that this is easy. But no one said being a Christian was easy. This is hard work, and make no mistake, it is work. The world's not gonna turn itself right-side up while we stand aside and wait. It's time we push back against the pseudo-Christianity that wields so much power. It's time we take Bp. Budde's model and remind the world that Christianity is an open heart not a cudgel. It's time we reclaim the power in mercy, compassion, and love. It's time we made loving our neighbor a true priority. And it's well-past time we spread that good news, that people of faith are here for you, to love you, to care for you, to stand with you, to fall with you not because we benefit from it but because we remain broken until you are made whole. That is the Gospel of Christ, and that, that is why we are here. May that always be abundantly clear.