

February 3, 2019
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Pr. Craig Mueller

All The Rage

Do you like the preaching here? What preacher wouldn't love the compliments! "Good sermon, pastor... You really spoke to me... You hit it out of the park."

If you like Holy Trinity and especially the sermons, I could ask you to write a review on Yelp. Spread the word. Tell your friends that the preaching at your church is all the rage!

Of course, that would mean we preachers at Holy Trinity are telling you what you want to hear, right? That's a hard one. Last fall a sermon on Esther indirectly addressed issues of sexual abuse and the Kavanaugh hearing. No political parties, no names were mentioned. And we lost a member from it because it was too political, the person said. Last Sunday, a colleague of mine used the image of a wall in her sermon. No mention of the president or even the specific border crisis. But one woman stood up in the middle of the sermon and walked out.

If we wanted our sermons to be truly biblical, we would look to the prophets and see what happened to them. Speaking the truth got them in trouble. Their message was rejected. And things didn't end well.

It's downright impossible for a prophetic pastor to speak hard truths and challenge systems and governments when your paycheck comes from the offering! After all, in many churches there are folks on both sides of the vast partisan divide. And there may be police officers, government workers, or even immigrants in the congregation.

And there's another problem, you might add. Sermons are one-sided. There's no chance for dialogue, rebuttal, and pointing out to me some nuance or truth on the other side of an argument.

When Jesus goes back to preach in his hometown it starts out well. He's all the rage. He's a rock star. The people hang on his every word. He says the right things, gracious things. God is on the side of the downtrodden and the brokenhearted. The crowd gives him rave reviews, ten out of ten!

Then some of them start to mumble under their breath, "isn't this Joseph's son. The one born out of wedlock. Who is this—one of us—yet comes to us as one unknown, claiming divine authority?"

I wish the story would end there, with a question. At least everyone would still be calm. But then Jesus drops a p-bomb, a prophetic zinger. He gives two examples of God passing over their kind in favor of less-than-desirable folks: a Syrian army officer and a poor pagan woman at Zarepath. Think of people today who you most detest, who get your blood boiling, who fill you with rage. And imagine me holding them up as the example of the inclusivity and welcome we announce here every Sunday!

What happens next is a mob scene. Jesus's words incite such rage that violence erupts. They drag Jesus to the edge of the town. They rant, they chant: "hurl him off the cliff, hurl him off the cliff. He's a traitor. He's not one of us." So much for telling the truth. So much for the call of the prophet.

The prophet Jeremiah gives a pretty good excuse to God when he is called: "Don't call me. I'll be in touch when I need you. After all, I'm only a kid. I have no idea what to say." And who wouldn't resist a preaching agenda of angry words filled with destruction and devastation. No raves or thumbs up for Jeremiah, that's for sure.

Oh, I'm glad I'm Lutheran right now. We preach the good news, the gospel. Except. Except before the good news is the bad news. Exposing lies, injustice, hatred. And not in others, but in ourselves. You mean the problem isn't with the other people? We are the ones who are arrogant and complicit? We are the ones who dehumanize others who don't

see the world as we do? We are the ones who give lip-service to justice without changing our lifestyle or privileged status?

The cover story of the current issue of *The Atlantic* is titled: "Why Are We So Angry. The Untold Story of American Rage – And Where It's Taking Us." It's not just the president who is angry. We're all the rage. Maybe we all need a dose of First Corinthians 13. Not just to help us be more patient with our partner, colleague, or family member. Oh, that divine power could transform us to rejoice in the truth and not wrongdoing, to not insist on our own way. And kick us in the butt when we are envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, irritable, resentful. To quote Paul's list in that famous chapter!

Sounds like what is going on today—and maybe always, if we think about the human condition. We hear those sweet and touching words about love most often in sentimental settings. Yet, read the chapters before the lovely thirteenth. The Corinthians community had factions, divisions, and misplaced confidence. Sound familiar?

According to *The Atlantic* article, we've always been an angry nation. We were born of revolution. But now it's a constant drumbeat. But now our anger isn't at people we know, but distant groups we demonize. When we are all the rage, so to speak, can we sustain such a fevered pitch without becoming the thing we hate in others?

As the people try to hurl Jesus off the cliff, he walks right through them, leaving them to their own devices. When we hurl hatred and post rants online, we may feel a bit smug and somewhat satisfied. Yet, righteous anger must always be for the sake of transformation and the common good. And thus, be from a place of love. And sometimes I admit: that seems nearly impossible.

In the end it isn't about the preacher being all the rage, or a church getting rave reviews online. We gather each Sunday around Christ, the one who comes to us as unknown.

Let's be honest. Under the rage is human vulnerability, wounds, helplessness. Christ comes to us with gracious words of love and mercy. This gospel puts to death the childish ways Paul speaks out. This gospel sets us free and fills us with a hope that seems naïve. Yet week after we week we come to hear life-giving words and to feast on Christ's own body and blood. And as we leave the mirror seems less dim and we begin to see face to face. The One who comes for every child of earth. For every child of earth.