

"DO YOU STICK OUT LIKE A SORE THUMB?"

John 17:6-19

Sermon preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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We're all familiar with the image of Christians being thrown to the lions in the Roman Coliseum. They died for their faith rather than bow down to Caesar. By the way, that's all they'd have to do to save their lives. They didn't have to reject Jesus, they simply had to swear allegiance to the emperor and recognize him as a god with a small "g".

Believe it or not, for their time, the Romans were really quite tolerant because whenever they conquered a new country they allowed the locals to continue to worship their local gods as long as they also accepted the existence of the Roman gods as well. They were very modern and multicultural. They were so tolerant that they even gave the Jews a pass on worshipping the Roman gods. That's right the Jews were exempt from bowing down to Caesar. The Romans respected their allegiance to the one true God mostly because the Jews would be harder to handle if they were forced to bow down to Caesar.

But then this new religious group suddenly pops up, the Christians. Unlike the Jews who were concentrated in one geographical area, Israel, the Christians were everywhere steadily growing in number. They even had a foothold in Rome itself. These Christians were seen as a threat to the status quo. They refused to go along with the flow. Again, all a Christian had to do to keep the peace was to go to the local shrine, dedicated to Caesar, make a small sacrifice and then he or she could go on his or her merry way. The Christian could even still worship Jesus, but for some reason the Romans couldn't understand why these Christians refused to go along. That's why the Church was persecuted and Christians were thrown to the lions. Rome wanted order and stability. Rome wanted a unified empire, everybody falling in line, being the same. No one was supposed to stick out like a sore thumb.

Do you stick out like a sore thumb? Does your Christian faith cause you to go against the flow of the predominant culture? During World War II, right after France fell and Great Britain was bracing itself for the Nazi invasion, C.S. Lewis, T.R.R. Tolkien and several other writer philosophers, who were members in a small club called the Inklings, had a discussion over lunch. If and when the Nazis came, which one of them would be the first to be arrested by the Gestapo for their Christian faith. Fortunately the invasion never came so their question never went beyond speculation. But the question is a good one.

Could someone get enough evidence together to indict you for being a Christian and would you be convicted?

Asking a question like this may seem odd. Why would I get in trouble simply for being a Christian? Isn't being a Christian the same as being a good citizen? You take your responsibility to

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be a good and productive member of society seriously. You obey the law, you expect morality in government. You try to be a good neighbor, you support worthy causes. Aren't the Christian people a positive rather than a negative force in society? Certainly, it used to be, or at least, being a Christian seemed to be considered, a positive rather than a negative.

Not too long ago the U.S. thought of itself as being a Christian nation, That is, most of our citizens were practicing Christians, either Protestant or Catholic. Christianity seemed to hold us together and a central role in our society. But times have changed. Here's a metaphor that illustrates this change.

Fifty years ago, just at the beginning of suburban sprawl, it wasn't unusual for real estate developers to set aside several acres of land in the middle of their new housing developments for a church. The reason, all neighborhoods need a church. But that was then, this is now. Nowadays, when a church tries to build in a neighborhood, the community rises up to keep it out. "There will be too much traffic, it will put a strain on the sewer system, our neighborhood can't handle a church."

As you can see a lot has changed in fifty years. We now live in an increasingly secular post Christian age. The illusion that we are a Christian nation has been dispelled. We are now, at this point in history, closer to what it was like in the beginning. The Christian Church now exists in a pagan world that worships many gods. Of course, there is a difference, today in our nation at least, Christians aren't arrested or thrown to the lions simply for being Christian. But that doesn't mean that Christian people never suffer for their faith.

It may seem like a small thing, but take this example. A soccer league has some games scheduled on Sunday mornings. A boy decides, or it's decided for him, that being in church with his family is more important. Because he's a key player, his team loses. **"Where's your team loyalty?"** His coach reproaches the boy. **"You let us down."** Don't tell me the boy doesn't suffer.

Here's another example. A Christian woman got a big promotion in her company. On the first day of her new job, she meets with her new boss. He lets her know in a round about way that there are some not so ethical business practices in his department and if she wants to get along, she has to go along. She's stunned, not knowing what she got herself into. The first time something underhanded goes down, she blows the whistle. Later, she's told she's not quite right for the job and gets a demotion and a transfer. Don't tell me this woman doesn't suffer.

Here's the ultimate example. A young man, a graduate from Princeton Theological Seminary, goes down to Mississippi in the early 60's to work in the Civil Rights movement. He's given the job of registering blacks to vote. One night a pickup truck runs him off the road. He's taken to a secluded area and shot to death. Today, at Princeton Seminary there's a plaque in his memory with the inscription, **"Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."**

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That scripture is lifted from John's gospel, recording Jesus' last talk with his disciples in the Upper Room immediately before he was arrested. Jesus also said that night,

**"If the world hates you
be aware that it hated me before it hated you
If you belong to the world
the world will love you as its own.
If you want to get along,
you have to go along.
Because you do not belong to the world
but I have chosen you out of the world,
therefore the world hates you."**

When you say "yes" to Jesus and you committed yourself to following him, you also need to make the commitment to stick out like a sore thumb. You know what it's like when you hit your thumb with a hammer or you have a headache or a toothache. The pain affects your whole body. It's an irritant. Well, sometimes, God calls you to be an irritant and give the world, the secular culture, a headache. Sometimes you are given the choice, take a principled stand for justice and peace or be silent and cozy up to the culture.

Henry David Thoreau, the 19th century philosopher and social activist, was arrested for his work with the abolitionist movement. His good friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson visited him in jail. **"My Dear Thoreau,"** Emerson smirked, **"What are you doing in there?"** Thoreau responded, **"The real question, my dear Emerson is what are you doing out there?"**

The most powerful temptation you and I as disciples of Christ face is not doing something that's absolutely criminal or immoral, but doing nothing. To be still when the Spirit is urging you to speak. To do nothing when Jesus is crying out for you to do something. When trouble comes, or controversy arises, isn't it easier to be like the priest or the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, both doing nothing when they saw that poor man bleeding by the road side? And in his parable of the last judgment why were the **"goats"** damned? Because they failed to do anything for the naked, the hungry and the thirsty.

Why do we hold back from being like Jesus when there's an injustice being done? Why are we quiet when the way of the world, the powers to be, run rough shod over the weak and helpless? Simple. Because we're afraid. Your first inclination is not to stick out like a sore thumb. Go along and get along. Bow down to Caesar so you don't get fed to the lions.

Jesus knowing us so well took this into consideration in his last talk on that last night. He prayed to his Father **"All mine are yours and yours are mine, they are in the world and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name, those you have given me. I am not asking that you take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one."**

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Jesus was asking his disciples to put their lives on the line, but he was also asking his father to protect his disciples when they put their lives on the line from the Evil One.

Let's be very up front about this. When you risk yourself for a person or a cause in the name of Jesus there's no guarantee that you won't have to pay the consequences when the world system, the powers that be, Caesar, goes after you. When you buck the system and do the right thing at work, in your community or whatever you will make enemies and you will pay. **"The World"** will hate you because you're not going along. But you can be sure of this, God's presence will sustain you and God will keep you from being destroyed by evil. God will be with you, always. You may face a crucifixion, but God guarantees you a resurrection.

This morning, we remember Jesus at his finest the night before he died making preparations for his own death at the hands of those he threatened because he stuck out like a sore thumb. He didn't bow down to Caesar or the religious traditions of his day. He only bowed down to his Father and the little ones he was called to save.

As we celebrate Jesus through this Holy Communion claim his presence and his promise, not only to be with you in the best of times, but especially in the worst of times. Let his risen presence empower you so you can become more like Jesus, brave in adversity, unshakable in crisis and always filled with his love so that when they try to feed you to the lions you will not be moved and you will not be moved and you will be a witness to the power of God through the presence of Christ.

So be open to Jesus real presence within you. And know this. When you act in Jesus' name and you do the right thing, even when it costs you everything, God will continue to bless you beyond measure, because, for his sake you choose to stick out like a sore thumb.

Let us pray!