

## Devotion, Week of November 19, 2023

### Rev. Jeanne Simpson

Tom Long, in a recent article in "The Presbyterian Outlook," said that "Before there is faithful preaching, there is faithful listening." I am reminded of similar words of advice from my preaching intern supervisor, Dr. Peter Langerman. He used a term in Afrikaans, "wandel in der woorde," meaning "wander in the word." The idea is to read the Biblical text and then to listen for what it is trying to tell you, before you write a sermon about it. Long contends that preaching to a congregation can be a minefield of polarization and politicalization. Russell Moore, the editor-in-chief of Christianity Today, was interviewed recently on NPR. He said that pastors report that they are being attacked by parishioners when they preach on texts like those from the Sermon on the Mount, including Jesus' sayings like "turn the other cheek," "blessed are the merciful" or "love your enemies." Not only does he find it disconcerting that Jesus' teachings are openly ridiculed in church, but also that many preachers are whispering among themselves that our entire culture's toxic communicational environment has penetrated the sanctuary. "In a new and disturbing way, preaching has become perilous. Almost every part of American life is tribalized and factionalized."

Long says that "It is no easy task to preach sharp, courageous and pertinent sermons that embody what we might call 'the politics of God': the gospel of the new creation in Jesus Christ that brings hope to a world passing away. Those sermons can so easily slip into the political agenda of the preacher, or at least be misinterpreted as such.... The very first sermon Jesus preached, and in essence every one of his sermons after that, was about the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. And when God's kingdom draws near, the kingdoms of this world tremble and resist. That is politics. When the New Testament speaks about 'principalities and powers,' it is referring to the resistance to God and God's path for us that is embedded in all human society. God's Word has profound political ramifications. The Romans quickly deciphered that Jesus was not a harmless spiritualized street preacher but was, in fact, a political threat. They didn't crucify him because he preached with cute hand puppets about chicken soup for the soul. They crucified him because his preaching and his presence were a threat to their very political power."

When I listen to the text and wander in the word, that text at times becomes pretty revolutionary in terms of what it infers about our culture today. I may not be as eloquent as I would like and I may not hear God speaking to me clearly, but I try. And I do that, knowing that I am just a member of the community like all of you – God speaks to all of us, if we listen.

Long says that "Our culture, weighed down by poisonous communication and weary of divisive words, lies and cynicism, is beginning to realize afresh our need for authentic and truthful words. Trapped in a deafening echo chamber of rage, our culture is oppressed and exhausted by listening only to its enraged self. We yearn for a trustworthy word from beyond ourselves." That is what I attempt to find as I prepare a sermon, and I hope that is what you attempt to do as you listen to God's Word. We must all actively listen to the voice of the Spirit in our Christian witness and then speak the truth in love.

*Jeanne*