

“The Gospel Has Teeth”

Sermon Reformation 2018

Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 8:31-36

October 28, 2018

Standing between our home here in Forest Park and that of our neighbor's is a solitary pine tree. I admire this particular tree for several reasons: one, it takes me back to my growing up years in North Carolina where every tree in every direction was a hearty pine; two, it stands as a sort of symbol that, no matter where the Spirit carries us to ministry the grounding of “home” is never too far away; and three, it reminds me of a lovely center piece made for and given to us while we lived in Pennsylvania during Pastor Lauren's internship year. A member of one of her congregations had put together a basket of pine cones, vibrantly colored dried leaves, and fragrant greenery for our dinner table. Seeing the cones in our yard here in Illinois recall many fond memories of that year together.

One day as I was doing some late-summer yard work and I decided to pick one up one of the cones as a sort of memento, a recognition of our past and a symbol of fall coming to Chicago. As soon as I picked it up I winced in pain. With great pause and confusion I examined the newly acquired trinket and noticed that it, and all the other pine cones on the ground, had sharp, pointy spurs on the end of each scale.

I paused because it hurt and I wasn't expecting it. I was confused because the lovely little pine cones in that lovely little center piece from Pennsylvania did not have such hatefully huge armaments! They were like tiny teeth that carved into my palm. I wanted to throw it away and move in the other direction. Precisely the biological point, I suppose. Those innocuous little landmines in my yard aren't like the center piece cones I remembered: those perfect, round, and smooth cones, so effortlessly rustic and fresh looking. I figure the centerpiece cones were manufactured to be pet and child (and 35-year-old male) friendly. But the savage wild pines of Hannah Avenue have no such regard for safety and general well-being.

Like sharp-edged pine cones, there are many things or events in our lives that might call upon us to pause. That might shock us into examination. That might generate confusion in our minds. Things or events or situations that seem harmless at first but have a sharp edge when we get a closer look. But not often, I would propose, would we consider Scripture being one of them.

Along with sunshine and rainbows of creation and flood, along with feeding and healing and teaching, along with shepherds and sheep and babies in a manger comes sharp-edged wit and wisdom that cuts deep into the palms of our lives. And this might very well be the first time you've ever heard the Bible compared to a pine cone.

Now yes, God's Word already has another botanic analogy, that of a seed that, when planted produces faith and truth. Seeds that are planted in the fertile soil of our hearts and are nurtured into branches of hope and life. But sometimes, like in pine cones, those seeds are wrapped up in toothy, gritty, sharp, and maybe even painful truths. Truths that make us wince and pause upon hearing them.

Truths like we have broken covenant and commandment. Truths like everyone has sinned and has fallen short. Truths like everyone who commits sin is a slave to it. Truths like, on our own, we are captive.

Captive to violence in faith communities, neighborhoods, & schools, captive to selfish ambition and partisan vitriol, captive to disbelief and jaded senses of justice. Captive and cannot free ourselves.

When we really examine the holy words we've just picked up, when they catch hold of our fast-paced and hurried lives, those teeth could very well surprise, confuse, and cut us open right to the core. We are left exposed, raw, vulnerable. And that's uncomfortable, to say the least.

But after the initial shock comes the true heart of the Word: the seed of potent promise that God will take our exposed, vulnerable, and open hearts, bodies, and minds, and write a word of covenant deep within. The seed of knowledge that God will be God and we will be God's people. The seed of assurance that our freedom from the grip of sin and death has been secured because God became flesh, has lived and is living among us, and the way and the truth and the life has a body and a name and a love for you. The seed of confidence that our reality is no longer marked by our successes or our failures but rather by grace as a gift. The seed of love that is expressed on a different kind of tree. A tree not manufactured for safety or decoration but a tree on a hill where the Son of God died so that sin and death would no longer have the last word in our lives.

The Gospel has teeth. And it just might, it just could, it very well should, cut us open to the core. Leave us open and exposed and vulnerable so that the Word becomes a part of who we are and describes who we are called to be. Our encounter with Scripture does not leave us to bleed out, though. In it we encounter our refuge and our strength. Though the world may change, we need not fear, for we have been claimed.

We need not fear an open heart, for it is now opened to others: in caregiving, in generosity, in kindness, in sharing, in giving. We need not fear exposure, for we are all made one: united in Christ's body through water, bread, and wine. We need not fear vulnerability, for through it comes deep confidence, trust, reliance, and faith that God has taken hold of our lives and nothing will ever separate us from that grasp.

This is the Mighty Fortress about which we sing. This is the reformation of our lives by baptismal waters: where the Spirit breaks into our inwardness and calls us to outwardness. To outward expressions of God's redeeming love for me and you and the world around us, and our utmost need for only that wondrous love to be whole and complete.

This is our freedom: to let the Word carve itself deep into our hearts, to be cut open and made vulnerable to its trans-forming and re-forming Good News. called, equipped, and sent to unleash God's abundant love for the world.

There are many ways that the ministry of the church calls us to be open and vulnerable. We discern our varied gifts and skills to make a difference in the kingdom. And one of the ways we do that is through the giving of ourselves and our resources. We asked you to fill out Faith Promise cards because talking openly within our households about giving is to be vulnerable. Talking openly about giving is taking a risk that an honest look might reveal our priorities have been misplaced. We have to talk openly about Grace Church falling behind and how it has real effects on what we can and cannot do for the people and communities around us.

If you let it, giving faithfully and regularly to the church could feel like sharp teeth sinking themselves into a grand vision for a good life. But, so too, if you let it, giving faithfully and regularly will feel like sharp teeth sinking themselves into homelessness, poverty, disease eradication, missionary work, children's ministry, senior care, fellowship, faith formation, and so much more.

The Gospel has teeth. It cuts us to the core and leaves us open and vulnerable for what God might be up to next. And given all that God has done in the past, is doing now, and promises to do in our future, this is a pine cone we can carry around for a good, long while. Carried without fear, carried full of hope, a transformative seed planted, a reforming Word of love written deep within our hearts.