

Sermon – 7/8/18
Mark 6:1-6
7th Sunday after Pentecost
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
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It is the Eighth of July in Davidson, North Carolina....and the weather is about as sunny and as beautiful as it can possibly be on a July day in North Carolina. It is not even supposed to hit **85** degrees today, and to that, all of God's people should in fact just say "thank youJesus."

I can tell you that 41 years ago today, in Raleigh, North Carolina, it was a whole lot hotter. It was stifling, like over 100 degrees, hot and humid, the kind of day where you would rather hang out at, I don't know, say the Davidson Ice House or Whit's Frozen Custard. I remember how hot it was because that afternoon we buried my father's ashes into the ground at the Oakwood Cemetery in Raleigh. He had died three days before.

There are not many people left in my life who ever knew my Dad. That is a shame, because he was somebody good to know. He was soft spoken and slow talking, yet he was funny and sharp witted and more than anything, he just kind of oozed wisdom at our family dinner each night, 7 p.m. sharp.

And so when I graduated from high school, my father handed me some white pages inside a plastic cover. And on the white pages he had written in his own unique handwriting, in different colored inks, a bunch of witticisms, or aphorisms, or mottos, even clichés, some thought up by other people, some from his own curious mind. These were intended to get me through the rest of my life. I got you this far, Dad was saying, now these will help get you the rest of the way....

And some have lived with me forever, and some will stick with me all the way until my own ashes land right beyond those windows...(pointing to the DCPC columbarium) ...

Here is one:

Comfort the afflicted.....afflict the comfortable.

Now I believe social media, like Twitter or texting in general, or something going on, something in the water, is **decreasing**, not increasing, the vocabulary of many Americans. These days at times it seems as if one could get by in life by responding to anything that is said to us with either one of two things: oh my gosh, or awesome.

So this morning I must make sure that we all understand what the verb **afflict** means, because if you don't understand that, you won't be able in the end to call this sermon awesome. If you google "afflict definition", you get this: cause pain or suffering to; affect or trouble.

So, comfort those who are in pain, suffering, or trouble; and **cause** a little trouble for those who are so darn comfortable, so darn entitled, or so darn privileged. Just do it.

My father included that one because I already was a high school journalist headed for a career in journalism. In my journalism days you would hear that phrase often. Journalists have a bit of a calling to cause trouble for those in power, who too often are corrupt, or at least power hungry, or love doing things behind closed doors. In or exposing these people's corruption, their wrong doing, the hope is that some comfort is provided for the have nots who are the victims, the victims, of the haves.

Dad had no idea I would ever feel a call to ministry. In 1977, I didn't either. Well guess what, when I got to seminary in the mid-90s, suddenly I am hearing the very same slogan, only this time used in the context of

ministry. It turns out that theologian/writer Martin Marty heard of this journalism phrase and decided, hey that works for ministry, too. And so now in my second career, I still hear comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable.

Jesus had a second career, too. His first was carpentry. In his second, he comforted the afflicted, and he afflicted the comfortable....and nobody, ever, before or since, has done it any better.

In recent weeks we have reconnected with some of the healing stories. They are everywhere in the gospels. Jesus touched the untouchable, healed the unhealable, loved the unlovable. What a friend we have in Jesus, yes! Jesus loves me, this I know, the Bible tells me so, yes! Yes, yes, yes, Jesus loved the downtrodden and the marginalized and instead of sitting at the head table at the banquets, he was over there eating with the sinners. Jesus was, and is, all about comforting the least of these. If you are troubled, if you are suffering, if you are afflicted, I promise, Jesus is there for you. He is a remarkable friend.

And yet there was another side to Jesus. The side that led his hometown crowd to cry, what up with this guy, he is just a carpenter, what does he know, he has gone out of his mind, and heck yes, we are offended big time by him. As Mark records, "And they took offense at him."

Well, of course. If you are comfortable in your comfortable life, and if you really listen to Jesus, yes, you might be offended. You might resent just how amazing grace is, especially when it bestowed on somebody you don't think deserves it.

Here, by his own words, is this Jesus:

If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.

Give to anyone who begs from you

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you

But love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your **heart** will be also.

You cannot serve God and wealth.

Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will eat. Is life not more than food, and the body more than clothing?

Do not judge, that you may be judged.

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.

Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.

Pause

Jesus was a radical. He was counter cultural. He turned society upside down. He did it so well that about three years after he started his second career, the authorities killed him. We in the church like to say they crucified him, which is exactly what they did, but let's keep it real...in Twitter America: the authorities killed him, killed him dead.

And let us be honest with ourselves.

Most of us here are not afflicted. My favorite baseball team losing 17 of 22 games does not qualify me as afflicted. I have a car, I have a house, I have satellite television, . and when a cop ever stops me, he is far more likely to send me along with a nod and a smile than he is to tell me to put my hands up. I am more comfortable than afflicted. You can decide where you stand on that scale.

And yes, those afflicting words of Jesus cause me to squirm a bit, cause me a little self-reflection, cause me to think, you know what, you could be a better follower of Jesus.

You, too, could judge less. You, too, could care more. You too could love better. You, too, could care for the interests of others more than the interests of yourselves. Nothing about Jesus says me first. Nothing about Jesus says country first.

We in the church of Jesus Christ should also feel afflicted. Some of us would rather talk about how we can prosper with Jesus, or how we can get to heaven in the arms of Jesus, than about giving up our lives and following him on this earth. Some of us are far more likely to say we are bible believers than we are Jesus followers. Some of us would far rather quote Leviticus or Deuteronomy than Matthew, Mark or Luke, or especially Jesus.

I have in my hands something called "DCPC Strategic Roadmap." Somebody around here put this together in the last few years to give our church a map to the future. And if you turn to Page 3, look for No. 2, under the category of learning, point A, it says this:

"Develop "followers of Jesus" as opposed to "followers of the church."

You want to know why I think the words of Jesus afflict is? Because we are comfortable, and because in our heart of hearts we know it is far easier to hate than it is love, which, oh by the way, are the Jesus commandments, the ones that tell us, to love, to God, to love the other.

Best thing I read this summer so far was in a novel called "Beartown" by my new favorite author, Fredrick Backman of Sweden. In that novel he writes this:

"Hate can be a deeply stimulating emotion. The world becomes much easier to understand and much less terrifying if you divide everything and everyone into friends and enemies, we and they, good and evil. The easiest way to unite a group isn't through love, because love is hard. It makes demands. Hate is simple.

"So, the first thing that happen in a conflict is that we choose a side, because that's easier than trying to hold two thoughts in our heads at the same time. The second thing that happens is that we seek out facts that confirm what we want to believe – comforting facts, ones that permit life to go on as normal.

"The third is that we dehumanize our enemy. There are many ways of doing that, but none is easier than taking her name away from her. It doesn't take long to persuade each other to stop seeing a **person**.....as a **person**."

Is that not exactly what is going on in our world today?

Friends, is that not what Jesus is asking of us: to look at the other, the enemy as a fellow human, as a fellow child of god, even though they look differently, act differently, behave differently, and we so want to erect walls, to call them anything but by their names?

I believe there is a God. I believe that God does not belong to me, but that I belong to God. And that God is revealed to us in Christ Jesus. That is what I believe.

A quote from the late Willian Sloane Coffin, senior pastor of the Riverside church in New York:

“Jesus is both a mirror to our humanity and a window to divinity, a window revealing as much of God as is given mortal eyes to see. When Christians see Christ empowering the weak (comforting), scorning the powerful (afflicting), healing the wounded (comforting), and judging their tormentors (afflicting), we are transparently seeing the power of God at work. What is finally important is not that Christ is God like, but that God is Christ like. God is like Christ. That’s what we need to know, isn’t it?”

Yes, it is. God is like Christ. And so may we follow Jesus, taking not offense at him, but heeding his words, listening to him, even emulating him, as best we can, each and every day. Amen.