

Comfort and Affliction
Text: Luke 7:44-47
Preached by Bruce D. Ervin
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A fellow was driving down the highway when his cell phone rang. It was his wife calling. She said, “Honey, I just heard on the news that there’s a car going the wrong way on the 401. Please be careful!”

And the fellow said, “I’ll try, dear, but it’s not just one car, it’s hundreds of them!

Someone needs to tell that guy to get off the road! Someone needs to care enough to confront him.

There’s a time to be comforting, and a time to confront. When your behaviour endangers others, someone has to confront you!

It’s kind of like, when you’re speeding. Driving too fast for conditions puts others at risk. Remember a few weeks ago, when I implied that traffic laws ought to be enforced, except perhaps for the speed limit? Well, guess what? That was Sunday, May 23. On Tuesday, May 25, while driving to the church, I happened to glance in my rear-view mirror. There I saw a Ford Crown Victoria that was lit up like a Christmas tree. Yeah, I got a speeding ticket. And the officer was as nice about it as she could be, but she still had to confront me.

There’s a time to comfort and a time to confront. Jesus knew this. His ministry had to do with comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. He cared enough to confront.

Consider, for example, this morning’s gospel story. Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus over for dinner. Jesus – who loved to eat, and teach, and joke at table – Jesus, of course, accepted. While they were eating, a woman entered the house. We’re told

that she was “a sinner.” We don’t know the nature of her sin. Maybe she was a prostitute. Let’s just say that she had made some mistakes in her life. So, Jesus is being wined and dined by this well-respected Pharisee, while this woman of ill-repute bathes and anoints his feet.

What does Jesus do? Typically, he afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. That is to say, he confronts the comfortable Pharisee for having such a judgmental attitude, and he comforts the prostitute because he can see right through her irresponsible behaviour to the pain that is fueling it; the pain which increases as her sin increases. He confronts Simon the Pharisee, and he assures the woman that her sins are forgiven.

Jesus Christ knew when to comfort and when to afflict, but the Church of Jesus Christ doesn’t always get it right. We preachers especially sometimes end up afflicting the afflicted and comforting the comfortable. Or sometimes we just try to comfort everyone. When that happens, the more challenging aspects of the Gospel get lost. You see, sometimes there’s a sting to the Gospel, as exemplified by Jesus’ challenge to the Pharisee. Sometimes the Gospel has to be bad news in the short-term in order to be good news over the long haul. In order to be comforting, sometimes we first have to confront.

Let me illustrate with a story.

When the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was a young pastor in Detroit, he said in a funeral homily that to grieve is selfish. Not something that I would say at a funeral. But then, Niebuhr was a lot tougher than I am. The man had a point. To grieve over the long haul – to let it go on for years – is to become preoccupied with yourself and

your own sad feelings. It means being caught-up in yourself rather than getting on with life and getting involved in activities beyond yourself that might honour the person who's passed away. Such grief is rather selfish and self-centered. Long term grief that you refuse to let go of really is a form of selfishness.

In the short-term it stung to hear Mr. Niebuhr say this. But in the long term it helped at least some of the folks who were at Bethel Evangelical Church that day. I know it did because my Grandma was at that funeral, and 60 years later, when Grandpa died, she told me what Mr. Niebuhr had said. It helped her as a young woman and it helped her as a widow. It helped her to get on with her life.

The Gospel doesn't seek to bring comfort simply for comfort's sake. No, the Gospel seeks the Truth. And what is true will eventually bring comfort. But sometimes it might sting first.

The Church – clergy and laity alike – the Church is sometimes confused about when to comfort and when to confront. Comfort is a virtue, but like all virtues, it becomes a vice if taken to an extreme. Which is what the middle class, North American church tends to do.

It's like the story of the life-saving station which was set-up more than a century ago. The shorelines of the Great Lakes use to be doted with these life-saving stations which rescued the victims of ship wrecks on the waters of North America's inland seas.

So there was this life-saving station. And its mission was to save people who were drowning. And it did a pretty good job of that; at first. But, you know, working together in a stressful situation tends to build community. And so these lifesavers got to enjoying each other's company. And when they weren't out rescuing people, they were

spending time together socially. There were pot-luck suppers, and dances, and getting together to play cards, and other such activities at the life-saving station. It was fun, it was comforting, it was good community and good fellowship. The fellowship got to be so good that there wasn't a whole lot of life-saving going on anymore. Folks got to focusing on their own comfort and their own needs. And a whole lot of people out there on the lake got left to drown.

Brothers and sister, the Church of Jesus Christ is in the business of saving people! It is in the business of rescuing folk who are drowning in selfishness and injustice, in war and in greed. The Church seeks to save people from sin; both their own sin and the sin of others. And being in community with one another is part of that – comforting one another is part of that – but it's not the *sole* purpose. Most healthy congregations go back and forth from times when they're more focused on themselves to times when they're more focus on saving people beyond their walls. And Knox is in one of those transition times. What began as a church reaching out to new immigrants with the good news of God's saving love became a very comfortable middle class church; a community where maybe the focus had shifted a bit too much to your own comfort. In the 1990's you *needed* to focus on your own comfort because you were a community in crisis. *You all were* the afflicted and you *needed* to comfort each other. But God has been good to us. We are the afflicted no more. And we have begun to shift our focus back to those who need to hear the good news of God's saving grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Our ministry with the Chinese community, our ministry with children and young families, our increasingly intercultural congregation which we have been celebrating this year during Black History Month and Asian Heritage Month; these

ministries testify to our shift in focus from a comforting ministry within these walls to a saving ministry beyond these walls.

But we dare not become *too* comfortable with our initial success. Simon the Pharisee was a good man who had become too comfortable. And Jesus had to confront him. North American Christians tend to be good people who are tempted to be too focused on their own comfort. As Christians, we dare not become too comfortable. After all, following Jesus has to do not with sitting in an easy chair but with bearing a cross (Luke 9:23).

We have been shifting our focus, and the time has come to be more intentional about doing so. Three years ago we did some long range planning in the form of a needs assessment. It was that planning which helped to launch our Chinese ministry and our growing church school. Perhaps the time has come again to plan for the future. Perhaps the time has come again to look out upon the stormy waters of this city; to focus on the sea of humanity which is Toronto; and to ask who is drowning, and who needs to be saved, and what are we prepared to do about it?

The Spirit of God is sweeping over the waters of this city, just as God's spirit moved over the face of the waters on the first day of Creation. The Spirit of God – the breath of God – is breathing new life into the Church, that we might again be engaged in saving souls for Christ's sake. But it's going to take planning. And it's going to take hard work on the part of volunteers and staff alike. In order to save one who is drowning, you have to plan and build a boat, and you have to roll up your sleeves, and you have to pull hard on the oars. I pray that the Spirit will breath into us the energy and the courage to do so. Amen.