

Sermon Text for September 30, 2018

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

I Kings 18:20, 26-29, 36-40, Acts 5:12-21a

“Don’t believe everything you hear”

You need to know that I put my list of sermons together at the beginning of July and so I would have had no idea that this week the nation would have been transfixed by two testimonies made where the title of my sermon could be interpreted as a support for one side or the other.

I learned early in my ministry, especially as I was working at the orphanage in Italy where many of the girls that we ministered to had been sexually molested and assaulted, that when you interact with women who have been sexually abused your first words have to be: I’m sorry, it’s not your fault, I believe you. So if you are wondering what side I take, I believe Dr. Ford. I needed to say that because I didn’t want you to misunderstand the title of my sermon. I could have changed the title, but it is important enough to not change it. The days of boys will be boys is over, there is no room for us men to think that we are able to get away with the things that we have been able to get away with in the past.

Now on to the Scriptures that we have before us, and why I titled my sermon months ago: “Don’t believe everything that you hear.”

I remember when I was a pastor in Florida and three of us, a lawyer, a cop, and a pastor, sounds like a bad joke, started an initiative called Deep Day. It stood for Day of Economic Empowerment in Palatka. The point was that on a chosen Saturday, one day, we would encourage citizens of Palatka to shop, frequent, go to a store that was minority owned. It got a lot of press, a lot of people were interested, and quite a lot were not interested at all.

I got a call from our church council President and he said that council wanted to meet with me after church, the week before Deep Day. We sat in the board room and the President began by saying: Bob, we hear you are leading a boycott and a strike against white businesses for a month. Somehow the Day of Economic Empowerment had turned into a month of crippling boycotts and strikes in the minds of some people. I explained our purpose was just to raise awareness and that there would be no financial impact on non minority businesses.

They were relieved and on DEEP Saturday as a church council we went together for lunch at a minority owned business. The President of council during lunch said: I guess you can't believe everything you hear. Isn't that the truth?

That is especially true when you read Scripture. So much of Scripture is written in such a way that when you read it you can interpret it in a certain way on face value. But as you pray, as you ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to see the whole picture, sometimes a very different and much healthier interpretation can arise.

We have been studying Acts for some time now and today we find a community that is doing exceptional work. In spite of a very aggressive stewardship campaign entitled Give or Die, which has caused people to be a bit stand-offish, we see that people are being saved and joining the fellowship. But now the most powerful group in their society begins a smear campaign against them, trying to hurt their names and to reel them and their influence in. People, powerful people, were truly out to get them, but the disciples were not afraid. They continued to preach the Gospel in spite of all the negativity that surrounded them. We can learn from them, not to believe everything that we hear, and continue to preach the whole Gospel.

READ SCRIPTURE

I know that there is a sense for some Americans that there is persecution against Christians in this country and some would use prayer in school as an example, or some government conspiracy by past presidents as another example, the decline of the word Christmas around Christmas time is another example used.

I have a very different view, and it is based primarily upon these Scriptures for today. In the OT we find a prophet whose very life was in danger because he loved the Lord. In the NT I see the Apostles thrown in jail for proclaiming the Gospel and healing people. What we experience today in our society and culture is one where being a Christian is actually to your advantage if you want to advance. Christians hold all the positions of power in this borough, state, and nation. These Christians, from the President down, are not afraid to say publicly the role that their faith takes in their decision making. Can you imagine someone who was overtly non-Christian making their irreligiosity a topic of their campaign even coming close to public office? I know that many of us here would not vote for that person strictly because he/she was not a Christian.

The sense of persecution that we may feel as Christians is not truly persecution. It is what I call the losing of our majority power which has allowed us to pretty much do anything that we have wanted in the name of God. Don't believe everything that you hear. There is no anti-Christian crusade agenda in our country today. There may be an attempt to cut back on zealots, people who try to aggressively enforce their way of thinking and living on others.

I hear almost on a daily basis the complaint from Christians about how they are being persecuted. If you want to see the persecution of people who love God, then let us turn to these verses that we read today. Elijah was a true prophet of God, which meant that he was in serious trouble. Jezebel and Ahab, the leaders of that time, did not like him and certainly did not consider his advice as something that ought to be followed. They publicly followed the God Baal. They had priests of Baal who tried to show Elijah that he was the phony.

Keep in mind that Elijah loved God and had the entire status quo against him including the highest leaders who were actually after his life. The entire population saw him as the enemy. But Elijah challenges them directly and says: you say you are more powerful than my God, prove it, show me. They can't and Elijah mocks them in front of the others and then gets to work. God comes down and shows the people by his actions his power. If we were living back then we would have more than likely listened not to Elijah who was considered strange and an outcast, but believed the status quo. But the actions of Elijah show us that God was truly on his side.

In Acts we find the Apostles in their post-Give or Die campaign. In vs. 13 we find that none of the rest dared to join them. But they were in awe. People still came to believe and give themselves over to Christ. As the verses go on they would bring people so Peter's shadow could pass over them and be healed, probably because they didn't want to get too close because they had heard about Ananias and Sapphira.

People would come from even outside of Jerusalem to bring people in. It is obvious that the disciples were becoming well known, not just because of what they were saying, but specifically because of what they were doing, with all the healing and leading people to Christ. People wanted to know what was happening. They had the respect of all the people. But they were doing too much. In vs. 17 we see the high priest take action because it specifies that they were jealous. In the Greek it means literally that they

were zealous. These leaders were the status-quo of that day, much like we are in this church and in this community. This is a warning.

These leaders set the rules and the people had to obey them, these leaders were the ones who interpreted the Scripture and basically showed the people the way to live. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, but what happens is that they start to feel threatened because there is another group that is outside of the common every day life that is starting to tell people that there is another way of life that is exciting and doesn't depend upon the church and societal leaders in order to live that life. Well, in order to deal with that threat the leaders have the disciples arrested, throw them into prison, and because they were in power, they try to discredit them by all the other powerful people that surrounded. Like today, if you are surrounded by powerful people you can get away with just about anything and you can say just about anything.

Scripture tells us never to return evil for evil, so that is exactly what the disciples do when they find themselves in the jail. While in jail an angel sets them free and instead of trying to tell people not to believe everything that they hear that the Sadducees have been trying to spread, they just went back to doing what they were doing which is what the people admired and respected and which is what they wanted to follow.

Listen to the command that the angel gives them. Go, stand in the temple, the very place where they had arrested you, and tell the people not to believe everything that they hear. Tell the people the whole message about this life. If there is one thing that I want people to be able to leave church feeling confident about Sunday after Sunday is that they have heard the whole message of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The whole message, because you can't just believe some of it.

The whole message is a Gospel that proclaims that yes, we are sinners and God doesn't wink at sin and that God takes sin personally like we heard last week, but that is only part of the message. Some want to leave you with a life of guilt and fear making you think you can never get right with God. The whole message tells us that we shall know the truth and the truth shall set us free. The whole message is that God loves us so much as the East is from the West and in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. I was amazed by how many of you came up to me after last Sunday and said you really appreciated the sermon because you did not hold any punches.

We are called to proclaim the whole message because we live in a society that is preaching and hearing only part of the message, which is a warning not to believe

everything you hear. Part of the message is that when death comes it is complete so you might as well live this life to the fullest because once you die that is it. Well, the Good News of Jesus Christ is that as you mourn the death of a loved one, when you find yourself in a cave of doubt and depression and fear because this past week has brought back up some demons you had hoped you had dealt with, but they are still there, there is still hope.

Don't believe everything you hear, hope is not lost. Jesus Christ has taken our broken bodies and raised them to glorified bodies. Don't be satisfied with only part of the message that leaves us completely abandoned, but hear the full message when Jesus says that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not death nor life.

Brothers and sisters, don't believe everything you hear, but let us live our lives not out of the fear of the unknown, but rather based upon the loving and powerful complete Word of Jesus the Christ whose perfect love wipes out all of our fear and replaces it with an eternal hope. Amen.