

**Gospel Community as Witness
A Persecuted and Comforted Community
John 15:18-16:33**

How many of you know someone from Florida who evacuated for Irma? Over 7 million people evacuated from FL and GA. This is a nasty hurricane and it was wise for people to evacuate. My sister left Ft Lauderdale on Wednesday with her three children to head to Beech Mountains in the NC mountains where my daughter and her family live. For a while, it appeared Irma was going to follow her right into the mountains. We have friends in the Dominican Republic and Lee and Marisol Newton have family and friends in Puerto Rico. In a few days, rebuilding will begin.

It is difficult to wrap your mind around the destruction caused by Harvey and Irma, isn't it? Have you seen the images from the Islands? Joy Vonk, who used to play violin for our worship team, serves as a PA in a ministry at a clinic in Houston. Joy was with us two weekends ago while Harvey was thrashing Houston. Her trip had been planned long before the hurricane was on the horizon, and while she was glad not to be in the throes of the storm, her heart was with the people she serves and does life with in Houston.

There is something about a crisis that causes us to focus on what is important – and that brings people together, doesn't it? How many times have you heard after a storm or an earthquake, "We are not this political party or that political party, we are not different races, we are not different nationalities. We are one community that has come together to help each other through a difficult time."

This morning, we continue our mini-series titled *Gospel Community as Witness*. The instruction we have received has been found in the last half of the book of John, most of which consists of Jesus' teaching to his disciples on the night before he was crucified. Today we find ourselves in an extended passage – John 15:18-16:33. It is a long text, but we will only read a portion of it, though the whole section will inform the sermon. In this text, Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure and for their persecution. He was not leaving them helpless, though. In addition to giving them a strong community of support in one another, he promised them that the Paraclete – the Holy Spirit – would come to them and, although it was hard to believe, it would be even better for them with the Holy Spirit than it was with him being present with them. Really? That's what the disciples thought!

I will be reading John 15:18-16:11 and then finishing with verse 33 of John 16, a great word of encouragement from the Savior. Even though we are cutting out quite a few verses, it is still a long portion of Scripture to read. Instead of standing for the reading of the text, as we normally do, I will lead us in prayer and then read through this portion of the text before contemplating implications for our gospel community – Grace Community Church – in a time of increasing difficulty for believers. Would you pray with me?

I will be reading from the ESV. John 15:18:

15:18 “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. 21 But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. 22 If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. 23 Whoever hates me hates my Father also. 24 If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. 25 But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: ‘They hated me without a cause.’

26 “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. 27 And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.

16:1 “I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. 2 They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. 3 And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. 4 But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. 5 But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ 6 But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. 7 Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. 8 And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: 9 concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; 10 concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; 11 concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

33 I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

Seven things we need to remember as we dwell in community, beginning with:

- **Persecution is not about you; it is about Jesus**

First, you may be thinking, “Persecution? Really?” Well, I am not sure at what level you experience persecution, but at least at some level someone thinks you are nuts if you follow Jesus, closely. It is especially so if you attend a church that actually believes the Bible is God’s accurate word to his children. Many today think that religion should be kept entirely in its place, unless, of course, it conforms to the religion of culture. That is why candidates for federal judgeships are being asked by United State senators, how serious they are about their Christian beliefs. This past week, California Senator Diane Feinstein expressed concern about the beliefs of Amy Barrett, a respected law professor at Notre

Dame, saying to her, “The conclusion one draws is that dogma lives loudly within you, and that’s of concern when you come to big issues that large numbers of people have fought for years in this country.”

What the Senator means is that Barret is unfit to be a federal judge because her beliefs about abortion and about same-sex marriage are colored by what the Bible says, not what culture considers to be convenient and acceptable. In other words, religion is fine – in its place. And, if you cannot keep it in its place, then we need to deal with you. Okay, that is not what Feinstein is saying, exactly, but some are and those voices will likely grow.

In the first century, the church did not have much to say about abortion and same sex marriage in the public square because they were not allowed to have a voice in the public square. Most of their conversations about their beliefs were with one or two others at a time, and their topic was about Jesus. That is what got them into trouble, because when people followed Jesus, their views on a whole host of things changed and it began to affect society. Many thought of Christians as arrogant, thinking that they believed no one else would go to heaven except them – which, in fact, they did believe. No wonder Jesus said, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.” Do not expect the world to be rational when it comes to the gospel. When people hate you because of your beliefs, it is because they hate Jesus – or, they hate the Jesus you proclaim because *that* Jesus divides people, which moves us to our second point:

- There is only one division between people that makes an eternal difference – those who believe Jesus and those who do not

The world is constantly trying to divide people into two groups. In Jesus’ day, it was Pharisees and Sadducees, and though they were miles apart religiously and politically, they came together to oppose Jesus. Today, there are Democrats and Republicans. I know, some of you want me to say Libertarian, but in the end, it is donkeys and elephants – until it is two other prominent political parties. Then, there is black and white, hipster and not, those who are physically fit and those who are not, those who stand for a cause and everyone else, whether they are vocal opponents or just silent. You get the idea. In the end, there is only one division that matters – either you belong to Jesus or you don’t. Other divisions are designed to distract you from the most important question of life – do you trust Jesus for eternal life, or do you trust something else?

When you decide to follow Jesus, or, as our text makes clear, he chooses you, he also pronounces judgment on those who do not believe. Such truth is divisive and offensive and you had better know that before you commit to the community. Jesus did not sugarcoat his message to the disciples, but told them, in so many words:

- The greatest danger that followers of Jesus face is not death, but apostasy

Listen, again, to Jesus’ words in John 16: “I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. 2 They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. 3 And they will do these

things because they have not known the Father, nor me. 4 But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.”

In the earliest days of the church, persecution came from the Jews, but it quickly switched to the Roman government. When addressing the coming persecution, Jesus did not say, “Pray that you will not be killed.” Instead, he said, “I have said these things so that you will not fall away.” Believe it or not, there are worse things than others thinking you are narrow or fanatical or mean-spirited. There are worse things than going to prison for your association with Jesus, and there are even worse things than death. That is why Jesus was always saying things like he did in Mark 8: “36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? 37 For what can a man give in return for his soul? 38 For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” Sobering words. Next:

- At the core, the issue is theological, not cultural

Over the last portion of his ministry on earth, Jesus had much to say to the disciples about his death and resurrection, and, also, his ascension back to heaven to the glory that was rightfully his as God. The disciples responded with an emphatic, “Huh? What do you mean – never mind, don’t tell us!” After the Holy Spirit came upon them, they began to make sense of Jesus’ teaching. They understood two things about the cross – 1) wicked men put Jesus there, and 2) God had planned it before the world began. Why? Because a holy and righteous God requires payment for man’s sin – a payment all men and women are incapable of making. When Adam messed up, the entire human race fell with him. Jesus addressed the dilemma of a holy God accepting sinful men and women by living a sinless life and dying a sacrificial death so that all who acknowledge their sin and trust Jesus’ payment for them will be saved.

In a few weeks, we will begin a ten-week series on the five solas of the Reformation (look it up) as we near the 500th anniversary of what almost everyone agrees was the starting point of the Reformation – October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses – or, 95 points of debate with the Catholic Church – to the church door at Wittenberg, Germany. Martin Luther was the first large personality of the Reformation, and quite the colorful personality he was. He was greatly flawed, but he understood – maybe better than anyone of his day – that the cross is the dividing point of history and the great divider of men and women.

Luther considered all humans to be theologians, or, to have beliefs about God. Luther placed them into categories based on their beliefs about God. He said we are either theologians of glory or theologians of the cross. In other words, some seek glory in their lives by trying to climb up to God while other recognize that they are incapable of attaining righteousness in themselves, so God meets sinful men and women through Jesus, not as an example to follow, but in the weakness of the cross where he paid for their sins. What you believe about the cross separates you from the other side. Most of us are uncomfortable when people dislike us or to think we are arrogant, but those who oppose the belief that

Jesus had to die for their sins will mostly oppose us and, eventually, hate us, because they hate the notion that they are incapable of earning their salvation. There must be some way, some works that I can do, some cause I can take up that will earn salvation for me. But, no.

That does not mean, though, that those who oppose the gospel do not believe in right or wrong. They do. It is just that they do not want any outdated religious book telling them what is right or wrong, and this is where we must be very careful, which is the focus of our next point:

- The gospel community must allow God – not the culture – to define sin and to provide its remedy

Whenever the church allows the culture rather than Scripture to drive the focus and energy of its ministry, it is treading on dangerous ground. If the culture at large is opposed to the truth of Scripture, even if you say the right things on the *issue du jour*, you will not be able to satisfy the world's demand that you conform to its standard instead of the Bible. What does the Bible teach? The gospel. Consider Jesus' words in John 16:8-11:

“8 And when he (the Holy Spirit) comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: 9 concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; 10 concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; 11 concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.”

What do these verses mean? There are many interpretations! It seems best, though, to understand what Jesus was saying in context of the gospel. The only sin that will condemn a person is unbelief – a rejection of Jesus and the cross. Concerning righteousness – Jesus said he was going to the Father. There was much the disciples didn't understand, but when he had risen from the dead and ascended to the Father, and when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, they began to understand that the only righteousness that would qualify a person for eternal life was imputed righteousness – or, for the Father to say, “I accept Jesus, in his death, paid for your sin, and, thus, his righteousness is credited to you.” Judgment? It was rightly directed at every single one of us, but Jesus got in the way of God's judgment and those who hide in the cross are safe. Satan is judged and has no claim on the life of a believer. Praise God!

Many of the current issues that are hotly debated in our land are directly addressed in Scripture. Respond to them in a gospel-saturated manner. Sinners? We all are! The remedy? The gospel. It is our only hope. In the gospel, we are one community of love, which includes bearing with and forgiving one another. As we do so, we say to the world that Jesus is enough. Some will love it and some will hate that message, which is the focus of the next point:

- Believers should make preparation for persecution, but also anticipate the Father's presence, Jesus' joy, and the Holy Spirit's encouragement

Is it alarmist to say that the church is heading for persecution? We have enjoyed not only freedom, but a measure of respect for a long time. Will that change? Almost certainly. And most changes of such nature occur far more quickly than we expect. When the culture identifies us as haters because we hold to a biblical view of marriage and human sexuality, and when the culture thinks that the gospel is not enough to address racism, which the gospel absolutely does address, or when the culture has had enough of a religion that preaches exclusivity of salvation, as in, “only those who believe in Jesus will be saved” – well, persecution is coming.

Almost everyone would agree that troubles will arrive someday – just not in our day. If you think that, I hope you are right. It may not be too long, though, before churches lose tax-exempt status because of our beliefs and what we will and will not do in spite of what the culture demands. Individuals may lose tax benefits for the financial gifts they give to the church. Both of these seem like not that big of a deal, but they will be if/when they happen. Surely these are not guaranteed in Scripture, and most nations do not allow it, but such moves would greatly diminish the impact of gospel-believing churches. Some of you already face discrimination in your work place because of your belief system – or, you would, if your views were known. The day may come, sooner than you think, when you will face civil fines that will put an incredible strain on your finances. I could say more, but I will stop there lest you think I am paranoid.

Jesus warned the disciples about persecution to come so that they would not fall away. It was far from gloom and doom, though. He told them that their deep sorrow would turn to unspeakable joy. I had a question come to my mind in preparation for the sermon that startled me. See if it has the same effect on you. Were the disciples more joyful while Jesus was with them, or were they more joyful later, when Jesus had returned to heaven and the Holy Spirit had come to indwell them? Later! Even in persecution. In the book of Acts we are told that when the apostles were warned by the Pharisees not to speak in Jesus’ name, they went back to the community of believers and prayed, in Jesus’ name, for boldness to proclaim the truth about Jesus. When they were arrested again and beaten for preaching sin, righteousness, and judgment, they, being full of the Holy Spirit, rejoiced that the Father counted them worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. Thus, Jesus was correct when he had said, “Ask in my name and the Father will give it to you.” Probably not what you were thinking about praying in Jesus’ name, was it? The final point:

- Rejoice! We know how the story ends

Do you remember the first time that the Holy Spirit impressed the truth of John 16:33 upon your heart? I do not remember the circumstances, but I do remember being taken aback at the beautiful truth of this verse: “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” Trouble, remember, has a way of bringing us together as a community of love, which is exactly what God has designed the church to be. That appeals to the world. Gospel community as witness.

Is your heart troubled over the way the direction that the world is trending? There is peace in Jesus. Do you have financial difficulties or medical issues that are overwhelming you? Have you lost a loved one, recently? I know that some of you have. The Holy Spirit will comfort you, often using those in the community in which God has placed you. Jesus is with you, and he has the last word. “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” Amen. Let’s pray.