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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
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Pentecost 6, Proper 7A
Matthew 10:24-39

I think I can safely say that there has been no nation on earth – none – where preaching the Gospel of Christ has been consistently easy.

In Japan early missionaries were slaughtered. In South America priests who tried to help the poor were slaughtered. In strict fundamentalist Islamist states Christian lives are in jeopardy – persecution exists today in Indonesia, with churches the targets of radicals, and in over forty other countries Christians live in fear..

Certainly, in so-called Christian countries it *seems* easy and painless and not rough. But in England Protestants were decapitated by Roman Catholics – and vice-versa. Our own Puritan fathers and mothers were persecuted – and so they came to this new land, America. But in the 17th century Baptists were persecuted in New England. So-called “witches” were burned at the stake or drowned in Massachusetts – the very colony to which English Puritans had fled to escape their *own* persecution! Roman Catholics

faced discrimination and taunts in New York. And, let's face it, *admitting* that you're a Christian isn't always easy.

Oh, in some communities it is *expected* that you attend the mega church next to the mall. In some communities it is *expected* that the Mayor, the Governor, the board of aldermen, the town council – that they will all be Christian. Christian of a certain stripe, that is.

But along with the political division of our nation between so-called “right wing conservatives” and “left wing progressives” there has come to be a division between so-called “right wing fundamentalist Christians” and “left-wing liberal Christians” so strong that some on one side or the other would doubt the very faith that the other side holds dear. And we all get painted with the same stripe.

As Jesus said: “Brother against brother.”

And while it may be just fine to express one's “Christian” views on a few particular issues, just try preaching the rest of the Gospel: “Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Love those who persecute you. Jesus is Lord.”

And don't forget: "Blessed are the poor."

A history lesson.

Sarah and Angelina were the daughters – out of fourteen other children – of John Faucheraud Grimké, a staunch advocate of slavery and the subordination of women. He was a wealthy planter with hundreds of slaves, and served as chief judge of the Supreme Court of South Carolina.

When Sarah was five years old, she saw a slave being whipped – and she ran away from home and tried to board a steamer to a place where there was no slavery.

Angelina was born thirteen years after Sarah, who begged her parents to let her be Angelina's godmother; she became part mother and part sister to her younger sister.

At age 26, Sarah, in Philadelphia seeing to the medical care of her father, became involved with the Quaker movement. When she died, she returned to Charleston, but three years later returned to Philadelphia to be closer to her Quaker

friends. Nine years later she returned to Charleston for one last visit, and converted Angelina – Angelina joined her in Philadelphia two years later.

This was in 1829.

In 1837, Angelina addressed a meeting of the Massachusetts State Legislature – she was the first woman to do so.

In 1838, Sarah wrote a paper titled *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women*, which was a response to certain ministers who had reprimanded Sarah and Angelina for stepping out of what the ministers called their “women’s proper sphere.”

So... they fervently supported the abolition of slavery. For this they were rebuked by their Quaker friends and other ministers. We must remember that Quakers themselves had been persecuted in England because they would not conform to the practices of the established church. Which is the mother of *our* church, by the way... They were imprisoned in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and New

Amsterdam, today's New York. And some of them, in turn, wished to persecute Angelina and Sarah.

Because they went too far. They pushed the envelope. They went beyond the conscientious opposition to slavery in advocating for the dignity of women.

Thank God for uppity women like Angelina and Sarah. They came to understand that women were oppressed and without power and that, without power, women could not address or right the wrongs of society.

Thank God for uppity women and their belief in the dignity of all created beings.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34)

Jesus brought the sword of justice and the sword of love, a sword which will literally cut through all the pomp and hubris, the arrogance and the pomposity of those who think

themselves above others *simply because of their gender, their color, their class, or their religion.*

Jesus just won't stand for that sort of thing.

What we hear too often in the media regarding Christianity is the kind of fundamentalist, Biblically literalist and triumphalist Christianity which puts forth a world view that America is a Christian country and that our government should rely on Christian principles – especially those Christian principles which, as they see it, concern one's private life, the bedroom, and women.

What we *don't* hear much about is the kind of progressive evangelism which would dare embrace the very broad theology of the Bible like this from the National Association of Evangelicals: "As sinners who are thankful for God's grace, we know that we do not always live up to our civic responsibility. Christians must approach political engagement with humility and with earnest prayer for divine guidance and wisdom...We work to protect the sanctity of human life and to safeguard its nature. We seek justice and compassion for the poor and the vulnerable. We work to

protect human rights. We seek peace and work to restrain violence. We labor to protect God's creation." (*From: For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility*, National Association of Evangelicals)

What we heard most about in the last national election is debate over the "sanctity of life" – remember Terri Schindler-Schiavo, abortion, stem-cell research? What we *don't* hear about, unless you watch a lot of PBS or listen to a lot of NPR, is something like the comment by Sr. Joan Chittester, a Roman Catholic Benedictine nun since the 1950's, who wondered aloud, "...if fetal life is invaluable, why not all life? When is life valuable and when is it not?" She went on to question the view of life as sacred when civilian pregnant women and children are dying every day in Iraq by American and insurgent bullets.

That's pretty hard stuff to swallow. Very hard stuff to swallow, in fact.

But it represents the challenge of the Gospel. It causes debate – healthy debate as well as unhealthy debate, holy

listening as well as close-minded ranting – and can, indeed, turn brother against brother.

But there's the good news. The comfort.

“Have no fear of them. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” (Matthew 10:26a, 27-28a, 30b)

The message is that God loves us. Loves you. Loves me. Loves uppity women and men of goodwill.

The good news of Jesus Christ is that we are all disciples. We will face persecution, brother will turn against brother, sister against sister. Like the Grimké sisters we may even be persecuted within our own community of faith. But when the cause is justice, as Jesus says, “be not afraid.”

If we are strong in Christ Jesus, if our faith is an ever-expanding source of life-giving hope – to the poor, to the marginalized, to the least of all – if our love of Jesus Christ as Lord is stronger than our love of any earthly sovereign or

any earthly institution, then the Gospel will spread like wildfire.

From time to time, it is a helpful reminder for each one of us to affirm our Baptismal Covenant – if you are willing, please open the Prayer Book – that’s the smaller book that’s not the Hymnal – to Page 304.

Please stand.

(The Baptismal Covenant is affirmed by those present.)

Holy God, source of all life: Keep us ever mindful of your grace and our Covenant with you. Help us when we are lazy or indifferent; strengthen us when we feel weak or afraid; embolden us when we hesitate to proclaim your Word, and keep us ever mindful that *you* are the source of all Wisdom, all justice, and all love. In the Name of your Son we pray,

Amen.