

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Anyone who knows me well knows that my dad passed away about eleven years ago from a particularly virulent form of cancer. He was pretty young, and the last five years of his life were colored by early retirement, chemo, surgeries, tests, tubes, hospital beds, pain, and drugs. Those are some of the facts. In a way that is nearly impossible to describe, his last years were also characterized by love, faith, laughter, intimacy, truth, and wisdom. Even though it's been over a decade, I still find the combination of deep love amid pain and horror an absolute miracle.

When I say that we had laughter during even the difficult times, I'm not exaggerating. I'm going to tell you two things that my dad thought were really funny during his cancer, and they're both a little off-color, so if that is not your kind of humor, just tune out for about two minutes, and then tune back in for the Jesus portion of the sermon.

My dad was sick right during the height of the LiveStrong movement. You might remember that Lance Armstrong, storied cyclist, hadn't had his titles removed yet, and he had started a charitable foundation committed to fighting cancer and general healthy living. Lots of people were wearing these yellow rubber bracelets that said LIVE STRONG on them. And for many people, the bracelet represented a public way to show their solidarity with people fighting cancer and working to live healthier lives. My dad thought they were kind of corny. Instead of saying Live Strong, he found a bracelet that said: "Cheat to Win." This was hilarious at the time, but it was even more so after the doping scandal.

Dad was a big fan of the Onion, a satirical newspaper that writes devastatingly funny headlines. Even in the middle of certain death, he'd read headlines and just howl. This was when the onion still came out in print, and so we clipped an article for him that was titled, "Man Loses Cowardly Battle with Cancer." I appreciate this is off-color, but my dad thought it was just hysterical, and we'd have a good chuckle about it.

I bring up these two jokes to try to say something about language. Cheat to Win and Man Loses Cowardly Battle with Cancer both cut to something true in the midst of my dad's experience with cancer. I think that when he felt powerless, the idea of trying to cheat the system so that he could live sounded really appealing. Who wouldn't sell a bit of their soul for a few more Christmases with their grandkids? And the headline about a man battling cancer in a cowardly way skewers this idea that we are supposed to be noble or strong in the midst of our adversity. What about those times we feel weak, or small, or cowardly? Is it possible that people are telling us to stay strong because they have a difficult time being in the presence of real weakness and real vulnerability?

Some language is like a knife that can cut through lies right down to the truth. The author of Luke is wielding language this morning like a sword. He is talking to a community that knows what it is like to experience persecution, and he is writing about their experience and framing it

in a way that shocks. Just like the humor my dad enjoyed had the power to shock but also point toward a truth, Luke's language shocks the listener out of the quotidian. Pay attention, the author says. Listen up, because the road of following Jesus Christ is going to get bumpy. When you stand up for what is right, the powers of the world will try to knock you down. Look around you. It is true. "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes...You will be hated by all because of my name." That's the knife in the text. But, in a strange way, I have to think that was a comforting word as well.

How can something so devastating be comforting? I think it has to do with it being true. A little episcopal church in Baraboo, WI tried to partner with a few other churches to get a winter homeless shelter up and running. It was a simple idea — make warm, safe, spaces for the homeless people who were living in the park on the coldest nights of the year. Homeowners associations, and eventually the city council blocked the measure, citing lies about the increase of crime and drug use when homeless folks are in your neighborhood, and the shelter wasn't able to be built. I'm all for checking on the price of your house, but you have got to be kidding me. What kind of special evil does it take to block a homeless shelter? And yet, when you follow Jesus, there will be push back. That's how our world works, and that is precisely the picture Luke is painting. So, counter-intuitively, the harsh words bring the comfort of truth. Sometimes it feels good for someone to stand in front of you and say, "Yes. This is going to be hard." I see parents doing for and with each other all the time.

So, yes. It is going to be hard sometimes. That is the nature of this short, fragile life that we lead. Any Christian who tells you differently is naive at best or a charlatan at worst. Luke is giving us the real stuff, the truth about this way of life that we have chosen. And what a gift that is. But the Gospel isn't just leaving us in the muck. It reminds of two important, Christian facts: 1. We have our community around us 2. We have our God with us. And so it is true. And the presence of God in the midst of our struggle makes everything different. My dad died, but he died well, with grace and with power, and with humor. That little church in Baraboo dusted off its feet and built its shelter five miles down the street. The people persecuted in the Gospel of Luke went on to share the story of Jesus so far and wide, that we are reading it this morning half a world away. The bad things are not the last things. The bad things are not the last things — because that is not how the story of God works.

So be brave enough to listen to the truth and to share then truth — even when it is hard. But take comfort in the fact that we are joyful in adversity, because of the God who is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Amen.