

July 14, 2024 – Amos 7:7-15 & Mark 6:14-29

Years ago, back during seminary, we were having a discussion in class one day about how Lutheran churches do ministry in other countries. What their worship services looked like, that sort of thing. And this eventually led to a discussion of the great difficulty that Lutheran churches in countries that are hostile to Christianity have in holding worship services. Communist countries like China. Muslim countries like Iran.

And this eventually led to a discussion of what would happen if the United States became hostile to Christianity. And I mean really hostile. I'm not just talking about media bias. Or even losing our legal rights to freedom of worship.

I'm talking about outright, state-sponsored, violent aggression. The type of aggression you see in places like China or Iran. How could that possibly happen? What would it be like? What would we do?

And in the midst of this discussion that the students were having together, our professor interjected with a bit of a bombshell. He said, "The one thing you all need to realize is that if it ever did happen. If a mob of armed men showed up in your church. You, as the pastor, will be the first one shot."

And the whole room went silent. It wasn't something we had ever really thought about. But, unfortunately, he's right. It's part and parcel with the whole pastor gig. We may be safer here in the United States than in other places in the world. But, ultimately, we've put a target on our chests for anyone who hates Christians.

Then again, it's a target that every Christian has, to some degree. Two weeks ago we heard the confirmands make some very solemn vows. Vows that I made sure they understood before they agreed to them.

"Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, *even to death*? ... Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and *to suffer all, even death*, rather than fall away from it?"

These questions are not asked lightly. In some parts of the world, they are a very real call to martyrdom. Even for us in the U.S., they're an honest acceptance of risk, no matter how small it might be. Every member of this congregation, whether as teenage confirmand or an adult confirmand, has put a target on their chests the moment they publicly declared that they were a part of this congregation.

Then again, for most of you, your parents already put a target on your chests, years ago: when you were baptized. Luther says in his large catechism that everything a Christian does out of faith and devotion to God makes him a target. From hearing God's Word to obeying God's Law to receiving God's sacraments to praying in faith to God our Father.

It all makes you a target of temptation for the devil. A target of hostility for the world. A target of doubt and despair for your own sinful flesh.

But that's nothing new. God's people have been targeted in those ways for thousands of years. Since the Garden of Eden, we've been targeted. And many have lost their lives as a result. Prophets of the Old Testament like Amos in our lesson. Who stood up to priests and kings. Speaking truth to power. And were struck down where they stood.

The apostles and disciples of the New Testament. Men like Stephen and James and countless other heroes of the faith. Who endured stoning and crucifixion and execution methods I don't even want to describe, rather than fall away.

And then there's John the Baptist. Who we hear about in our Gospel lesson. Imprisoned because he said the king was wrong to commit adultery. Killed because the king's wife didn't like having her non-existent honor impeached by this man from the desert.

Like Amos, John the Baptist had dropped the plumb line of God's Law in their midst. A perfectly straight, perfectly vertical line. Showing right and wrong. And he was killed for it. Can we expect any less from our own generation?

No, the fact of the matter is that being a Christian is not a safe occupation. It entails a lot more risk than a lot of us want to admit. If you feel like leaving, the door is back there.

But before any of you run away, perhaps I should mention the purpose of all this risk. Because it's worth asking, "Do I really need to be that committed?" I mean, think about it: If a man is holding a gun to my head and he asks, "Do you believe in Jesus?" Is God really not going to forgive me if I say, "No." He forgives countless other sins that have far lesser consequences than dying. I would think that would be the very first sin He would forgive.

And you know what? That's true. If you break the promises you made during the rite of confirmation, will God still forgive you? Absolutely. I can say that without hesitation. If he can forgive Peter, who said he didn't even know Jesus. If he can forgive Thomas, who refused to believe that Jesus could rise from the dead, He can forgive you if you cave under the pressure.

That isn't the issue here. This isn't about whether or not you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Because I already know you don't. I don't. None of us does. There was only one man who loved the Lord that way. And he died on a cross so that I might not fear God's wrath when I fail.

No, that isn't the issue. The issue is actually one of loving your neighbor as yourself. Because men like Amos and John the Baptist and Stephen and James and the apostles. They're remembered for the risks they took. They're remembered for being martyrs.

The sacrifice they made didn't show God how good they were. God already knew they were sinners. God had already chosen to give them grace anyway. They were, as Paul tells us, predestined for adoption by God. Whether they were martyrs or not made no difference to their salvation.

But it made all the difference to people around them. Because a person does not risk their life for something without value. A person does not endure the pain of stoning or crucifixion or beheading or any other death unless they believe to the core of their being that it's something worth dying for. A person does not sacrifice that much unless they are sure – unless they are absolutely certain – they have obtained an inheritance that is more precious than the life they are giving up.

And that says so much to your neighbor. Jesus said, "*Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*" And when you lay down your life to show that faith to your neighbor, when you lay down your life to show them something worth dying for, you also show them that same love.

And yet, here's the really interesting thing. You don't have to be martyred to show that love. That's not the only way. It's a good way. It's a powerful way. It might even get you your name in a book somewhere. But you can show that love without having a gun held to your head.

You just have to die to yourself. To your own desires. To your own sinfulness. To your own selfishness. When you live for your Lord, you die for your Lord. When you live for your neighbor, you die for your neighbor. When you live for the Kingdom of God, you die for the Kingdom of God.

And that's really at the core of what it means to be a Christian. You can be a Christian and never be martyred for your faith. You can be a Christian and never be put in prison. You can be a Christian and never suffer the fate of John the Baptist.

But that doesn't mean you haven't died. You've just died in a different way. You've died to yourself, by showing a sacrificial love for the people around you. People who need to see Christ in your words and actions.

They need to see that plumb line of God's Law in your life. They need to see that confident hope of God's chosen people. They need to see the grace of one who knows he is loved by his God, even when he hasn't loved his God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. They need to see that community of faith, who gathers in communion around the Body and Blood of our savior and finds their strength in Him.

If you can do that, then you have loved your neighbor. If you can do that, then you can hold your head high with prophets like Amos and John the Baptist. And if you can do that, if you can live a life for the good of your neighbor, then if the day does ever come – heaven forbid – that a man points a gun at you and asks you to declare your faith. Then you might just find that the right answer comes more readily than you ever thought possible. Amen.