

A Safe Space

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

© 2017 by Dr. Jim Gilchrist and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: March 3, 2017

Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever (Psalm 40:11).

People want lots of things from God, but one of the things they want most is safety.

You hear it in the psalms. Our call to worship this morning, from the 4th psalm, says, “You alone, O Lord, make me to lie down in safety.” The 23rd, the most familiar of all the psalms, finds courage in claiming that “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me.” And the 40th psalm pleads, “Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.”

We all want to feel safe, and for good reason. It’s the most primitive instinct of our animal nature. Safety helps to keep us alive, and protects us from things that might harm us. We’re afraid of anything that threatens our safety, and angry at anyone we perceive as a threat, whether they really do threaten us or not.

There’s an article in the March issue of *The Atlantic* magazine called “A Resort for the Apocalypse.” It tells how, for anywhere from half a million to a million and a half dollars, people with lots of money are buying upscale shelters underground to protect them against whatever catastrophe scares them the most, from an attack with weapons of mass destruction to the breakdown of society itself. The article contrasts the simple fallout shelters some people built in the 1950s and 60s during the Cold War with the new high-end luxury models, featuring gymnasiums, greenhouses, car depots, and other amenities—all

underground, with armed guards posted at the entrance. If things really get out of hand and society collapses altogether, these people hope they'll be able to weather the storm, at least for a while.

The clamoring for safety runs all the way from national security on a grand scale to preoccupation with law and order domestically to the more subtle fears people have around ordinary relationships and personal psychology.

I often hear people say that they're afraid, in our increasingly uncivil society, even to talk with some of their own family and friends, for fear that the conversation will turn into yet another food fight over politics or some other controversial subjects. They're afraid people will just rush dogmatically to their battle stations, without even listening to anyone who might see things differently. Some people's sense of infallibility is so thoroughly reinforced by their narrow range of news sources and their like-minded social circles that they think anyone who disagrees with them is simply too benighted to be taken seriously.

Lots of people these days feel they can't share many of the things they're concerned about with the people that matter most to them. But isn't that a sign that there's something seriously wrong with some of our relationships? Shouldn't the people we care most about be precisely the ones with whom we can discuss the things that concern us the most?

For meaningful conversation to occur on important issues we need a safe space to meet and talk, and especially to *listen* to one another. The church of Jesus Christ ought to be that kind of space, where we can talk freely and safely about anything at all—not because we all

agree and have the same point of view, but because the fundamental commandment we have from Jesus is to love one another, and the kind of love we learn from Jesus creates a safe space where everyone can come together in peace.

The love we learn from Jesus is not just the sort of love that flows from our attachments, attractions, or affections, but a love that begins with an attitude of goodwill towards all people. If we love one another in that way, we won't just pounce on people when they see things differently, or automatically attack their integrity when they disagree with us. Instead, we'll start with the reminder that the other person in front of us is a beloved child of God, just as we are beloved of God; a sinner like us, but a precious sinner for whom Christ died and was raised again, to bind us together in a new kind of community.

There are all kinds of churches in the world, and truth be told, some of them are not so much welcoming communities in Christ as enclaves of like-minded people ready to condemn anyone who sees things differently from whatever litmus tests they use as criteria for membership. Those churches are among the main reasons that a large and growing number of people, especially young people, want nothing to do with “organized religion.” They're known these days as the “Nones”—the ones who, when asked about their religious affiliation in surveys, check the box marked “None.”

The church needs to be a safe place for people to gather from all different social backgrounds and political inclinations, a place where what unites people—a commitment to loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves—is more fundamental than anything that divides

us. That deeper commitment to loving one another creates a gracious space, where grace gives each of us room to grow in all sorts of ways.

To say that the church ought to be a safe space is not to say that we don't challenge each other, and ourselves, to continue to grow in faith and discipleship. Some people say they want to come to church to get away from all the controversies out there in the world, as if safety was simply a kind of avoidance. But my experience over the years has been that many people yearn for a space where the great challenges and conflicts of life are not just avoided, but can be addressed in thoughtful, compassionate, constructive ways that build people up instead of tearing them down. Where else, if not in church, can we come together in an atmosphere of love and respect to listen to one another, considering the possibility that we might need to broaden our point of view, and so become better human beings than we would otherwise be on our own?

We see something of the gracious space the church can provide in one of Jesus' most familiar parables. It's a story about two very different sons and the father they have in common.

The younger son is impetuous, undisciplined, and more than a little self-centered. He wants his inheritance right now, and doesn't want to wait around until his father dies; so the father, in spite of whatever pain he feels from his son's insensitivity, gives the boy what he wants. The young man runs off and squanders all that his father gave him—which is, after all, a gift he did not earn—until before too long his inheritance is gone. Then a famine arises in that far-off land, but now the boy is broke. He tries for a while, unsuccessfully, to scrape together a living, and then, when

all else fails, he decides to go back home again, hoping his father will take him in, if only to work as a hired hand in the fields.

When the father sees his son in the distance, he's so glad to have him back that he runs down the road to meet him, arms outstretched, to welcome him home. Then he orders up a great feast, a homecoming party, to celebrate his son's return.

That's the first part of the story, and the reason why it's called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But there's another part of the story too. When the elder son catches wind of all these party preparations, he enters into a major snit. He resents his younger brother's selfishness and irresponsibility; and it galls him beyond words that when this undeserving ne'er-do-well returns, his father, instead of giving him the stern comeuppance he deserves and making him pay for his for all his offenses, goes out and lavishes a party upon him. It's hard, isn't it, when you think you've done all the right things and you've been responsible all your life? It's just hard to see other people getting things you think they don't deserve.

Now when the father sees his elder son sulking, he doesn't condemn him, any more than he condemns the younger boy. Instead, he shows his son what grace does: he invites both the profligate and the perfectionist into the same safe and reconciling space.

The space the father creates is safe for both boys—not because it leaves them alone to remain the way they were, but because it welcomes them into a place where they can grow and become so much better than they were. The conspicuously self-indulgent sinner and the smugly self-

righteous sinner are equally welcome in their father's house, invited to learn from one another, and especially to learn from their father's grace and generosity.

The company Jesus gathers around himself comes to be called the church—the community of disciples learning to live the way Jesus taught us to live. A central part of his teaching has to do with creating a gracious space, a space where we can bring our impulsive, undisciplined, self-indulgent selves and also our hard-working but rigid, self-righteous selves, safely together, to work things out and become better human beings than we could ever become outside of this beloved community.

The world desperately needs a model of safe spaces such as this, and we need it too—which is one reason why we're all here, and why we welcome anyone else who wants to be here, to come safely home at last.