

It was Thursday afternoon around dinner time. I was sitting on the floor of my friend's kitchen, next to the water dish. Brutus, the dog was lying close by, and all three of us (my friend, his son and myself) were gathered around him - petting him, stroking his back, his head, his ears.

The previous evening I'd been invited over to dinner, where Dan had told me, "Tomorrow, Brutus is going to cross the bridge." He was sixteen (113 in dog years) and you could tell Brutus was ready. So there we were on the floor around him, on the cusp of saying goodbye; me in my clergy collar and these two men, bracing for the end.

The grief of people around pets is understandable. Pastor Randy Pendergraft talks about a quality of dogs (especially) that gives us the closest, clearest reflection of God's loving, gracious forgiveness that we can experience on this side of the grave. Whether you believe that or not, the attachment that grows between pets and their people is amazing. In this case, Brutus was the one who had seen this family through the sudden loss of their wife and mother last summer. He had been their comfort, a steady presence, and now we were gathered around him, preparing for his death.

The vet and assistant arrived. Dan picked up Brutus and we walked out onto the deck. Sunlight was coming through the trees in that particular way it does late in the day. We were all kneeling or sitting close around Brutus, but Dan was laid out on his stomach completely, face to face with him. There was a short reading (The Rainbow Bridge) and then I was invited to say a prayer.

It was a terrible prayer. Just brutal. All of us were crying, including the vets, and here I was in my collar barely able to speak into this space of sorrow for the sake of this family. So my prayer didn't go great. But all the same, the vets administered the shots and death was pronounced.

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

This had been an experience for me of being bound - by emotion, by the circumstances, by my desire to speak true and affective words. I was slave to a cruel master in my self-criticism afterwards. Standing firm, confident in the promises of God that set us free - free from death, free from fear in the face of death - was my aim, but I stood far from firm.

I am not the first to feel such things. I'm sure we all encounter opportunities to speak our faith that we wish we could re-do. Whether it's words to console or just a simple explanation of what it is we believe about this “Christian thing” - it can be hard to stand firm, letting go of our most critical, accusing voice afterward. And in the wake of such experiences, are we able or willing to speak such words again soon after? I for one am not.

The cruel truth is that faithful speech is what we need. This society has a lot of ideas about what Christianity is: Judgmental, morality-focused, exclusive, thoughtless and gullible people worshiping a God who only loves perfection, generously doles out punishment, and sends his son to be executed for the sake of some twisted sense of divine justice. Sitting in here, we don't recognize the world's definition of us *because that's not us!* But this is what stands firm in the face of our silence outside these walls.

So what is it that keeps you bound when it comes to speaking about your Christian faith? To what are you slave when you keep silent? Is it shame that quiets you? Is it perhaps a fear of ridicule, or our most familiar tormentor - failure? Despite our Lutheran faith in a loving God, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love - are we actually still slave to our own accusing, judgmental voices?

The other cruel truth is that we have something that needs to be heard. There is too much grief, loss, and hurt in the world for the promises of God to go unheard. We who believe must not be silent in the presence of death, in the face of death, that this world tells us is final. We who believe must not be silent | because our belief, whether full or incomplete, is not ever only for us.

Speaking openly, sharing generously, articulating our faith in a God who loves us beyond all hope and reason is hard in a world such as this. This is why we come to church: To practice that faith, to put it to our lips and in our mouths. We say the words, we sing the songs, we pray the prayers, take in the body and the blood, and hear every word in the hopes that this living faith will live in us. And over time, week after week, that 'yes' takes root. And as sapling as whatever that root nourishes in us, it is made ours to share.

And so we begin, still at the morning's edge of Pentecost, a Project of Practice. Over the coming weeks you will hear in place of a sermon a one-on-one conversation between myself and one of you. With a set list of questions, the faith of those with whom we sit each Sunday will come to light. We will listen [each of them] into free speech, honor their courageous sharing, and open to them a willingness to hear and perhaps even speak ourselves.

If that sounds scary to you, you're not alone. The very possibility of being invited is scary. But I want you to remember two things - the same two things I think of as I prepare to come before you. 1.) The Spirit will do with your words what you cannot yet imagine. 2.) The Spirit will do with you what you cannot yet imagine. As Paul says, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." God invites us now, not only to freely share our faith, but to lean into the Spirit, trusting that she makes a way where none can yet be imagined. AMEN