

The Courage to Lose One's Life

Proper 17A - August 28, 2011

Both of the scripture lessons today touched upon the essential nature of personal courage in religious faith. A small village perches on a road half way up a mountain. The cemetery is a mile or so above the village and a prominent citizen is being buried today. The mortician and his assistant have just moved the coffin from the hearse to the carriage on wheels. Suddenly it starts rolling downhill. The mortician makes a grab for the handle but the coffin has picked up momentum and he cannot stop it. He courageously holds on and is dragged along making one valiant effort after another to slow the carriage, his feet hitting the road about every 6 or 7 yards. The coffin is rushing through the village when a wheel hits a stone causing it to careen through the front door of the pharmacy. As the mortician flies past the startled pharmacist, he pleads, "Sir, do you have anything to stop this coffin?"

What does it mean to be a religious person, a person of faith? Since age 16, I have spent most of my life as an active member of a Christian community & most of that as an ordained leader. Over the past 40 years, I have witnessed the Christian community in many forms & expressions. There are three I want to touch on briefly. First, there are Christian communities - the majority I would say - that understand and talk about following Jesus as almost solely an interior matter. All of the action takes place inside the human mind & heart. These inwardly-focused Christian communities spend all their time worried about how much their members read the Bible, pray for deeper devotion & love & believe the right doctrines about God so that they can go to heaven when they die. The dangers for any inwardly-focused spiritual community are: (1) they may become insular places of comfort where feeling safe and loved is thought to be the mission & purpose of the church, & (2) they may become places of hiding from the injustices, pain & suffering of those on the outside; places where courage is never seriously discussed.

The second form of Christian community is almost wholly focused on the external world, on reforming the way society operates, on politics, economics, war and peace. These communities spend little or no time thinking about personal devotion & the changing of the human heart through personal prayer & devotion. The dangers for any externally-focused religious community are: (1) their worship, teachings and sermons may become so politically & ideologically narrow that they stop attending to their interior life & to those spiritual practices which deepen our awareness of & love for God & our love for one another; & (2) they may stop listening; they may become fundamentalist in their views on the values & structures of their envisioned society unwilling to take seriously the views of any who disagree with them.

Third, there are a few communities that seem willing to balance & live into a focus on both their interior journey toward personal transformation & their call to strive for the transformation of the vision, values, & structures of society. These Christian communities understand that the life of religious faith is not only about practicing daily the disciplines of prayer, meditation & study to cultivate love for God & love for the other members of their parish family, but that, in addition to this interior work of healing & transformation, there must be its outward expression, its manifestation, its application out in the world, in politics, economics, business, war & peace. It is this third form of Christian community I hope we, the people of St. Luke's, are becoming; a community that values the courage of a believer willing to speak truth to those in power as much as it values the piety of a believer who prays & studies each day.

Jesus said that if any want to become my followers, let them make a commitment, not a half-hearted commitment in which one stays safely in the boat while others drown, but a deep, profound, life-changing commitment - a commitment that may require taking risks & putting one's life on the line. Nothing less will work. "For those who want to save their life will lose it

and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Moses is a great example. He had an interior religious experience which led him into a direct, public confrontation with the Pharaoh, the unjust government of Egypt. In closing, allow me to share another story similar to that of Moses in our first reading.

From The Fidelity of Betrayal by Peter Rollins: "There was once a small town filled with believers who sought to act always in obedience to the voice of God. When faced with difficult situations the leaders of the community would often be found deep in prayer, or searching the Scriptures for guidance and wisdom. Late one evening, in the middle of winter, a young man from the neighboring city arrived at the gates of the town's little church seeking refuge. The caretaker immediately let him in and, seeing that he was hungry and cold, provided a meal and some warm clothes. After he had eaten, the young man explained how he had fled the city because the authorities had labeled him a political dissident. It turned out that the man had been critical of both the government and the church in his work as a journalist. The caretaker brought the young man back to his home and allowed him to stay until a plan had been worked out concerning what to do next.

When the priest was informed about what had happened, he called the leaders of the town together in order to work out what ought to be done. After an intense discussion it was agreed that the man should be handed over to the authorities in order to face up to the charges that had been made against him. But the caretaker protested, saying, "This man has committed no crimes, he has merely criticized what he believes to be the injustices perpetrated by authorities in the name of God." "What you say may be true," replied the priest, "but his presence puts the whole of this town in danger. What if the authorities find out where he is and learn that we protected him." But the caretaker refused to hand him over to the priest, saying, "He is my guest, and while he is under my roof I will ensure that no harm comes to him. If you take him from me by force then I will publicly attest to having helped him and suffer the same injustice as my guest."

The caretaker was well loved by the people, and the priest had no intention of letting something happen to him. So the leaders went away again and this time searched the Scriptures for an answer, for they knew that the caretaker was a man of deep faith. After a whole night of poring over the Scriptures the leaders came back to the caretaker, saying, "We have read the sacred book all through the night seeking guidance and found that it tells us that we must respect the authorities of this land and witness to the truth of faith through submission to them." But the caretaker also knew the sacred words of Scripture, and he told them that the Bible also asked that we care for those who suffer and are persecuted. There and then the leaders began to pray fervently. They beseeched God to speak to them, not as a still small voice in their conscience, but rather in the way that he had spoken to Abraham and Moses. They begged that God would communicate directly to them and to the caretaker so that the issue could finally be resolved.

Sure enough, the sky began to darken, and God descended from heaven, saying, "The priest and elders speak the truth, my friend. In order to protect the town this man must be handed over to the authorities." The caretaker, a man of deep faith, looked up to heaven and replied, "If you want me to remain faithful to you, my God, then I can do nothing but refuse your advice. For you have already demanded that I look after this man. You have written that I must protect him at all costs. Your words of love have been spelled out by the lines of this man's face, your text is found in the texture of his flesh. And so, my God, I defy you precisely so as to remain faithful to you!" With this God smiled and quietly withdrew, confident that the matter had finally been settled. AMEN.