

The High Cost of Freedom

Psalm 13

Luke 10: 1 – 11; 17 – 20

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, July 2, 2017

Last weekend we attended a family wedding down in Charlottesville, Virginia. Taking advantage of some free time, we visited Jefferson's home, Monticello. The last time we visited Monticello was over thirty years ago. Back then, the docents spoke of Mr. Jefferson with unguarded reverence, extolling only his genius and essential role in the founding of our nation.

Last week, Jefferson's accomplishments were still touted but so were his contradictions. Despite his ringing words, "all men are created equal," he remained a slaveholder, even beyond the grave. Unlike Washington, Jefferson never granted his slaves freedom, not even his own children. On top of that, he was an elitist, living way beyond his means. When he died, his daughters had to sell their home and everything in it to pay off his debts.

Despite Jefferson's character flaws, I'm still amazed that in one generation there was gathered together in one room a small group of flawed but courageous visionaries. Each one staked his life and fortune on an experiment still being tinkered with almost two hundred and fifty years later.

A rationalist would argue it was a happy coincidence but is there such a thing as coincidences, happy or otherwise? No, God is always in the mix, working out his purposes through flawed human beings. All the more reason for us to acknowledge our flaws as individuals, a nation and the Church as we struggle to make his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And we struggle with God's will because like the Founders, we're forever being tempted to abuse our gift of free will.

In the beginning, God set up the pieces on the chessboard, giving us free reign to make our own moves. How we decide to make our moves has both intended and unintended consequences, depending on whether we choose to cooperate with God or not. As it happens, sometimes we do, sometimes we don't. That explains why history unfolds in an imperfect world as we wait for the imperfect to pass away.

Intertwined with human history we find salvation history. The two are one in the same. You can't separate one from the other because all history is really the story of God intervening in human events.

This morning's New Testament scripture is from Luke's Gospel. Luke made an intentional decision to document how the story of Jesus happened in real-time. We are told when Jesus was born, Caesar Augustus ruled the world, Herod was the king of Judea and Quirinius was governor of Syria.

When Jesus began his ministry, Augustus's nephew, Tiberius ruled the world, another Herod was the ruler of Galilee and Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea. These men were the movers and shakers of their generation, or so they thought.

Under the radar and from the corridors of power, Jesus was gathering disciples to be sent out to redeem human history and set the world on a radically new course.

Two Sundays ago, we heard Matthew's story of Jesus sending out twelve very flawed men to bring health to the sick, raise the dead, touch the untouchables and kick out demons. This morning we heard Luke's story of Jesus sending out seventy more disciples to change the world. We also heard Jesus repeat the warning, "I am sending you out like lambs into the mist of wolves."

A comparison can be made between the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence and the seventy disciples Jesus sent out, if only because the Founders and the Seventy made the courageous decision to stick their necks out. Both treaded on uncharted ground, knowing their efforts would be opposed by the powerful. Their decision to become lambs in the midst of wolves took faith and courage, especially when there was no guarantee any one else would join them. Nevertheless, the Founders and the Seventy answered the call to be and do their best for a cause greater than themselves.

Experience proves when it comes time for radical change, three distinct groups inevitably form.

First, there are the transformation agents who see change as a good thing because the status quo has run its course and outlived its usefulness.

Second, there are those who resist change because it's in their best interest to keep things just the way they are.

The third Group takes a wait and see attitude but when change finally comes they usually get on board.

The Founders and the Seventy shared one thing in common. They were both change agents. Their opponents were the ruling and religious establishments fighting to preserve their turf. In the middle were those waiting to be convinced, one way or the other. In this third group were the ones Jesus called, "the harvest," the most ready to accept the gospel, if there were enough women and men willing to stick their necks out to take them in.

That explains why besides saying, "the harvest is plentiful" Jesus added, "but the laborers are few."

Experts tell us 20% of any volunteer organization does 80% of the work. Experts also tell us the 20% doing the work grows expeditiously in their faith and humanity because they find themselves enjoying their new purpose in life.

But there's something else. The 20% realizes they are on the winning side.

Luke reports, "The Seventy returned with joy saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' Jesus said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'" (Luke 10:17-20)

Being a disciple of Christ can be difficult and dangerous. But despite the risks and sacrifices there is the satisfaction in knowing the power of evil is crumbling like a house of cards. It may not seem that way in the short term, but every day takes us one step closer to the age of completion, when peaceable kingdom will finally arrive and God's glory will fill the earth.

In the meantime, small groups of flawed but courageous visionaries will continue being formed to fight the good fight. Like those going before us and those coming after us, you and I must choose whether or not to be with the 20% during these tumultuous times we find ourselves in.

More than any other time in history, the world is changing at a pace so rapid we can hardly keep up with it. Some of the change is good, a lot of it is dubious. The danger comes from advances in technology bringing about, in Churchill's words, "a new dark age made more sinister and perhaps more protracted by the lights of perverted science."

This is scary stuff that could keep you up at night. All the more reason to remember Jesus' promise, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you."

Jesus didn't mean to say since Satan's days are numbered we're free from danger. After all Jesus was crucified and after him, all his disciples, save one were put to death.

What he did mean to say was well said by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans:

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to reveal to us... We know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose..."

What then, are we to say about these things? If God is for us who can be against us? Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth nor any living creature, nor anything else in all creation, will ever be able to separate us from a love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8)

Before he was executed, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his infant godson for the day of his baptism.

‘I’ve been thinking about what Christ will mean in the future. We will need a new form of Christianity in the time when the world has come of age. I think there is only one purpose for religion in the modern world, where people must come and share each others suffering and in the suffering of God in a godless world. We will need more than just religion in the former sense, we will need faith with Jesus Christ in the center. Real Christianity means sharing each other’s pain.

It’s not for us to prophesy today when men will once more ask God that the world be changed and renewed. But when that day arrives there will be a new language, perhaps quite nonreligious but liberating and redeeming, as was Jesus language. It will shock them by its power. It will be the language of the new truth proclaiming God’s peace with men.”

For the past two thousand years, each succeeding generation of Christians had to find new ways to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ in that new, liberating and redeeming language. But one thing remained the same, people of faith entering into the suffering of God in a godless world. Isn’t that why Jesus sent out the disciples to heal the sick, raise the dead, touch the untouchables and kick out demons?

Christianity is all about showing up to enter into the suffering of people who are sick, sad and outcast. By doing this we also enter into the suffering of God revealed in its fullness on the cross.

Minutes from now we will gather around the Lord’s Table. Eating and drinking the consecrated bread and wine demonstrates our desire to enter into Jesus’ suffering, and the suffering of others. We are nourished and fortified to return to the streets where we live, bringing the presence of Christ in us so God can reach out to others through us.

Discipleship is about being agents of change, the 20% ’ers making the necessary sacrifices for Christ and his kingdom. Sometimes it will be difficult and maybe even dangerous but if God is for us, who can be against us?

Remember, we are on the winning side.