

March 17, 2019
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The Cruciform Life

Luke 13:31-35

Philippians 3:27 - 4:1

I have a hard time reading the instructions of the Apostle Paul here in Philippians. When I think of how many Christian leaders have betrayed the Gospel, while pretending to be faithful, I find his words, “join in imitating me” dangerous.

The Reformed theological tradition grew out of a rebellion against the abuse of spiritual power to serve personal ends. Presbyterians do not have a Pope, bishops or priests – on purpose. It is not that popes, bishops or priests cannot be holy and good people. But Presbyterians came to the conclusion – through the painful instruction of the Protestant Reformation – that spiritual leaders are always first and foremost human. And human spiritual leaders are deeply flawed and always in need of grace and guidance. From the Pope to the local preacher, human spiritual leaders are always imperfect and are forever confusing their own opinions with God’s and misusing the Gospel to serve their own purposes. So, Presbyterians chose to govern themselves through a system of representative, elected leadership. This system has drawbacks. It is slow and involves lots of committees. But it has some distinct advantages. It is transparent and does not place all of the power to make decisions in any one person’s hands. This system is why you have been asked today to suggest individuals, whom you believe to be mature in their faith, to serve as Elders and Deacons in this congregation. In Presbyterian Government, we are suspicious of giving anyone too much power, and every Sunday we all pray a prayer of confession together, because we recognize the sin and self-deception to which we are all subject.

The only thing that makes me feel better about Paul’s call to “imitate him”, is that earlier in that same chapter he talks about how he regards all of his earthly accomplishments and recognitions as trash/useless/loss (3:8). In Chapter 2, Paul calls us all to imitate Christ, who “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, . . . and became obedient to the point of death . . . on a cross.” (2:6-8). So imitate Paul, insofar as he imitates Christ. I can live with that.

At the same time, I know that all of us have heroes in the faith whom we do try to imitate. It is right for us to look to those followers of Jesus who are just ahead of us on the journey. All of us grow in faith and the ability to love and serve God when we observe and learn from someone who, themselves, has been conformed to the example of Christ.

But what separates the good role models and teachers from the false, misguided leaders is whether or not their lives are conformed to the Cross. True Christian Leaders serve others in self-sacrificial love. False Christian Leaders serve themselves under the cover of spiritual authority. And many, throughout Christian history, have been confused about that. We say that we follow Christ, while at the same time we avoid suffering and self-emptying. We say that we are trying to imitate Christ, while we use the appearance of religion to serve ourselves.

Christian life is marked by suffering, service and death. Christian life is also marked by great joy and abundance and grace. But, in both circumstances, the Christian Life is always shaped like a cross – by self-sacrificial love. That is what I mean by the Cruciform Life. A Christ like life is always shaped like a cross. A Christ like life always seeks to serve God’s truth, not our own egos or wants. And to serve God’s truth – to worship God – there is a basic choice that must be made. Which Kingdom will we serve: The Kingdom of God or the Kingdoms of this world?

And Luke’s Gospel gives us a picture of these two kingdoms pitted against each other. On one side is the Kingdom of Herod, and Herod’s unlikely allies the Pharisees, who together are interested in eliminating Jesus to keep their power intact. On the other side is the Kingdom of God, whose purposes and interests Jesus serves, even when they contradict the Kingdom of Herod. The Kingdom of God is always an affront and a challenge to the Kingdoms of Herod, because every Kingdom of Herod is focused on the Herod.

It occurred to me that I often labor under a false assumption, and maybe I am not alone. I believe that it is a false assumption that God’s truth is going to be self-evident and that everyone will agree on truth when we hear it. Scripture and history teach us that this just is not true. Truth doesn’t build consensus, and everyone doesn’t agree on what is Truth. The Pharisees show us just how easy it is for us to think that we are serving God, when in reality we are using the cover of religious practice to preserve the power and status quo that serves our own purposes. The Pharisees warning to Jesus here in Luke’s Gospel ought not to be confused with a friendly gesture. It is more like a threat. You better not come close to Jerusalem, because we are friends with the “Big Boss” who can kill you! And if Jesus’ primary value had been his life, then the threat would have worried him or scared him off. Instead, Jesus’ primary value is truth and God’s Kingdom, so he says in response, “You tell that fox that I am doing the work of God’s kingdom and I am on God’s schedule, not yours. I’ll get to Jerusalem, but I will get there on God’s time and to serve God’s purpose. I know that you will eventually kill me, but it will be God’s truth and purpose that will be served, not yours. And then, Jesus laments. He weeps because he knows that he will die when he arrives in the Kingdom of Herod, because the Kingdom of Herod and all those who support it (including the Pharisees) will refuse to recognize God’s Truth and God’s Kingdom. There is no self-sacrificial love in Herod’s Kingdom.

Our focus or theme for the season of Lent is reconciliation. And today Scripture reminds us that Christian Reconciliation is about choosing to imitate Christ and patterning our lives on Christ’s life. Christians are to be reconciled to the TRUTH. Christians are to be friends of the cross (not enemies). Christians are citizens of God’s Kingdom, not citizens of Herod’s Kingdom.

And it is possible to be reconciled to the wrong things. It is possible to be reconciled to evil. It is possible to be reconciled to racism or the values of white supremacy. It is possible to be reconciled to hate. It is possible to be reconciled to the values of success, power, control and wealth. But Paul reminds us that being reconciled to those values makes us enemies of the cross of Christ, and hostile to God's purposes for the world.

Lent calls us to be very honest with ourselves about in which kingdom we have chosen to become citizens, which values we have chosen to be conformed to serve, and which master we have chosen to imitate. And we know to which Kingdom we belong, which values we serve and what master we imitate, by thinking about whose opinion we value, whose blessing we seek.

I remember when our daughters were in high school, one of them came home to report hurt feelings over something that someone else – a person they had counted as a friend – had said about them. The comment was not complimentary. I asked her if she thought that what the "friend" had said was true of her, and she said "No!" So, I said, well why do you care? If it is true, then work to make it not true. If it is not true, then know that God is the one who knows truth. Seek God's approval, not the approval of someone who says untrue things about you. Your "friend" only has the power that you give her. Don't look to her for approval.

I was thinking about this bizarre college admission scandal that has been in the news this week. I think that those parents, and maybe their children, were seeking to be conformed to the values of this world. They believed that a degree from a certain school would ensure one's success, acceptance and value to the world. That conformation to those values made it possible for them to lie, cheat and bribe in order to befriend that Kingdom. They cared very much what Herod thought of them.

And, these passages also made me think about the transitions of middle and later age. Some of us get to mid-life or even to retirement and we begin to feel empty, or like we haven't gotten what we wanted, or maybe what we deserve. It is easy to feel resentful or angry or empty. I think that at this point, it is important to evaluate whose Kingdom we seek to serve. God's Kingdom never promises an easy life filled with excess and fun travel, but it does promise real life through sacrificial love. God's Kingdom promises truth. A Cruciform Life means that we will suffer, but that this suffering will lead to real life, truth and love. Herod's Kingdom promises ease, abundance, power and control. So, when we find ourselves challenged with a loss of influence, a loss of power, a loss of wealth, a loss of privilege, do we double down and take steps to conserve, collect and protect our rights and power and privileges? That's what the Pharisees do. Or do we seek instead to give it all up to serve God's purpose – after the example of Christ? To which Kingdom do we belong? When we humble ourselves to serve God's purpose in the world and in our community, then the evaluation of the world will no longer have power over us. When we become friends of the cross –citizens of the Kingdom of God - when our lives are cruciform shaped – we don't fear suffering, loss, disapproval or death. We expect them, and we know that through our suffering, loss and death, God's truth will be proclaimed so that the world might be better able to recognize eternal truth through us.

When we belong to the Kingdoms of Herod, we seek to silence the challengers, preserve our power and privilege and our decisions are made based on what we want and deserve.

Christian lives are always shaped like the Cross. I don't want you to be mis-informed.