

Sunday, March 17 and Wednesday, March 20, 2019

Second Sunday in Lent + Luke 13:31-35

“Outfoxing the Foxes”

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI

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Jesus is living dangerously. He has been angry with the Jewish rulers for their pretense, with the disciples for their lack of faith, and with the crowd of people for their cluelessness. Leading up to today's Gospel reading, he admonished the crowd:

When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. ⁵⁵And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. ⁵⁶You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but how is it that do you not know how to interpret the present time?

When a synagogue leader admonished Jesus for healing a crippled woman on the Sabbath, Jesus shot back:

You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath until your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?

Today Jesus' anger comes to a full boil. Some Pharisees come to warn him that Herod, the local Roman ruler, has a price on his head. Herod has grown increasingly fearful because he's hearing lots of people calling Jesus King of the Jews, when Herod believes that title belongs to him. The only thing he can think of is to eliminate the threat.

Jesus is infuriated at the Pharisees. “You go tell that fox, Herod, that today, tomorrow and the next day I'm going to keep on casting out demons and healing people. And then I'll be back on my way to Jerusalem.”

The way of the cross, following Jesus, means seeing things as they really are and taking action as a result. Are we willing to live dangerously? Are we willing to risk our job, our status, or our comfortable corner of the world by speaking out against a system of authority that is the opposite of what Jesus teaches?

On a recent trip out of state, I had the chance to meet with a young woman, Andrea, who is in her second year as director of family ministry at a large suburban church. Andrea is creative, compassionate, disciplined, and has the heart of a servant. She is breathing new life into the congregation through such newly-conceived events as Beach Day in the midst of January's deep freeze, complete with sand, inflatable palm trees, beach games, and a picnic.

Sadly, however, Andrea plans to resign at the end of the next program year because of the challenging staff dynamics. Staff members are constantly parading their own accomplishments before one another and creating a competitive climate. They seem to be in it only for themselves. Now Andrea is being criticized for not being a self-promoter, whereas she knows Christ-centered leadership begin with servanthood.

Andrea sees that she can't survive in a culture where the power structure is fueled by bitter competition. So even though she is exactly what the church needs more of—bright, well-informed young people who are filled with the love of Christ—she plans to go into another vocation in which her particular gifts can be freely exercised.

Ironically, in leaving the church Andrea is following the way of the cross. She sees things as they really are, and is taking action as a result. It is impossible for her to be part of a staff in which the dynamics of human interaction are inconsistent with Jesus Christ as the Son of God, God revealed to us in human form.

The Pharisees in today's Gospel who tell Jesus Herod is out to get him are probably not thinking about his well-being. Instead they want him to go into hiding. They want to get this troublemaker who keeps calling them hypocrites out of the way. But Jesus will not be intimidated. You go tell Herod, that fox, no way. I'm going to keep on doing what I'm doing, even at the risk of my life.

Who among us is courageous enough to speak out when we see people in positions of authority acting in ways that deny God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ? When leaders work to fortify barriers between people as deserving and undeserving, when we know all walls of division collapse in the face of God's infinite mercy and love? Are we bold enough to challenge a power structure of that fuels a growing income inequality, in which the the median income of Standard and Poor CEOs has just hit \$1 million per month? Can we speak out in a way that incurs the wrath of those in positions of authority, even to the point of risking our lives? The old saying goes: If you were on trial for your life and the charge was that you are a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Paul puts in another way in our second reading: “For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; their minds are set on earthly things.” If we are following the way of the cross, seeing as they really are and standing up for Jesus as the truth, do we let those enemies run over us? Do we allow their barbs and arrows to fly unopposed?

For most of us, speaking out in this way is too much to take on alone. This is why we need the church. Our faith is immeasurably strengthened when we live as members of the body of Christ. One wise person has written,

It is not that the church controls the keys to something, but rather that the only way we can be truly alive in Christ is by being enfolded in Christian community. The church provides a collective identity and a communal mandate that we simply cannot find anywhere else. Our vital participation in a Christian congregation with shared values is the only thing that can prevent us from surrendering to the rampant self-indulgence and narcissism that mark contemporary America.

How else, except motivated by our solidarity with Christ and with one another, can we hope for change that will prevent these horrific attacks on our houses of worship—mosques, synagogues, churches—places where people are at their most vulnerable?

Is our response to the horrific shooting in New Zealand to hire armed guards, or as in one small Florida synagogue, for the rabbi to be trained in target practice so he can carry a gun at all times, even during services? Is our response to declare that God is no longer present in houses of worship, as the pastor of a Baptist church in New Orleans just did? He said, “The way that people now think about church in general, whether it is

the mosque, synagogue or what have you, is that it's not sacred anymore." Are we going to let faith be overrun by fear?

Especially in this season of Lent, let us not be intimidated by enemies of the cross of Christ. Let us pray for the courage to stand up to the Herods who want to kill us and the Pharisees who want to send us into hiding. Let us outfox the foxes by living as those who know their true citizenship is in heaven, even while the battle against Satan rages on earth. With our Jesus as our savior, we have nothing to fear.

Amen.