

Courage

Text: St. Matthew 10:24-39

Jesus is frequently talked about as a philosopher. For example, the current resident of the most exclusive house in this city once claimed that Jesus was his favorite philosopher. During the nineteenth century when biblical scholars began searching for what they claimed was the real Jesus, the historical Jesus, they did so by trying to strip off what they thought were all the superstitious accretions that had stuck to Jesus because of the ignorance of the first disciples. What they then came up with was a picture of Jesus as chiefly a moral philosopher; or, has been pointed out subsequently, a German university professor in the guise of a Galilean peasant. The trend continues. In the present search for the historical Jesus biblical scholars such as Marcus Borg have painted the picture of a liberal west coast university professor who teaches philosophy and religion -- in the guise of a Galilean peasant. This is to say, of course, that this Jesus looks suspiciously like Marcus Borg himself.

Yet, despite the tendency to recreate reality in our own image, there is actually *some* sense in talking about Jesus as a philosopher. He was certainly described as a teacher in his own time; like other philosophers in the ancient world, he had disciples. They sat at his feet and listened to him. And as he taught he certainly was trying to reshape the minds and hearts of those disciples and to teach them a way of life.

But Jesus also did some things that no other ancient philosopher ever did. One prime example is, as Matthew describes it, that Jesus during the course of his ministry sent his disciples out on a mission to spread the news of what Jesus was teaching. According to Matthew they were told to proclaim the good news; they were to tell Israel that “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” In doing so, they were to do some other non-philosophical things such as cure the sick,

raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons. In short, they were both to announce that a new cosmic regime was beginning, and they were to demonstrate it by very visibly casting out the forces that had oppressed humankind since Adam. All that is very different than anything any other ancient philosopher did. All other philosophers gathered disciples around themselves, and taught them as a closed enclave about the world as a largely closed system. Jesus, on the other hand, after gathering a set of disciples sends them out and has them announce to the world a change in the world. So he isn't just teaching his disciples about the world; he is actually changing it and he is announcing the change. That is where he is much more than a philosopher. He does more than teach about the truth, he is the truth that changes the world, he is the truth that brings what was hidden to light.

Now, one would expect that the world would greet such good news with joy. We enjoy philosophy, but in the end we know that we need something to *happen*; to have a teacher who actually can make happen what he teaches is wonderful beyond hope. You would think therefore that the world would be ecstatic to receive this good news. But as Jesus sends out the disciples, he also warns them that the world is not going to greet this cosmic good news with glee at all. Instead, their thanks for telling this news is that the disciples will be handed over to councils and will be flogged, and dragged before governors and kings.

Hearing this may have been quite a surprise to the disciples. But, as Jesus makes clear in this morning's lesson, they shouldn't have been surprised at all. After all, what happens to the master, is something that the disciples should expect will happen to them, too. So, if the world thinks Jesus isn't good news, if the oppressive forces of untruth reject the truth, and if the world thinks he is the devil and treats him accordingly, it should be no surprise that the world will treat his disciples the same way. That is what he tells his first disciples and his present day disciples

they can expect. Resistance to their message of freedom from the oppression of untruth is a predictable result of their faith.

Now, that, of course, makes perfect sense: like master, like disciple. Yet, if it does make sense, one then is led to ask how many present day Christians, at least Christians in Europe and North America think that this is going to happen to them? How many think that this resistance is what they signed up for? Not many, I would dare say.

Why would this be? Why, if the principle “like master, like disciple” is such an obvious inference wouldn’t people think this? Why don’t they think it would apply to them?

Well, perhaps it is because they believe that we live in a Christian nation and they think that there is nobody left to persecute either the master or his disciples since we are all on the same side. Perhaps they believe that the message that was once told in a dark, remote corner of Palestine really has now over two thousand years come to light, and everybody knows it, so there nobody left to challenge the message. Perhaps; yet, I doubt that many people really believe that.

Rather, I suspect that the reason so many of the so-called faithful don’t think the principle applies to them is because they believe something more like the very opposite of the principle “like master, like disciple.” Some think that since Jesus suffered they don’t have to do so, and that therefore our attempts to walk in his footsteps will result in a very different life than his. Thus, for example, many Christians, I suspect, treat the Christian faith as something like a talisman for warding off evil and not as a battle with evil. Indeed, by way of demonstrating this contention, I would point to a Gallup poll that once showed that the primary reason that people quit going to church is that something bad happened in their lives. Apparently believing that faith is to ward off bad things, should such bad things happen anyhow, people apparently reason that there is no point in wasting a perfectly good Sunday morning.

Now sometimes this is because, I am sure, of an unconverted point of view. That is to say, there are people who are in religion only for what they can get out of it personally, and their world of what matters extends no further than personal interest. But sometimes it is because nobody told them, as Jesus told the first disciples, that this resistance from the world is to be expected and that Christianity is not a talisman against suffering, indeed, that it may be an invitation to suffer.

The fact of the matter is that often churches are afraid of scaring people away by telling them the truth about all that faith involves. Thus it is a sort of timidity, a lack of courage, that keeps us from having to face the otherwise obvious principle of “like master, like disciple.” This is the sort of timidity that veils our eyes from having to see and to accept what it really means to go out and tell the world that the old regime is over, the sort of timidity that fears change, even if the change is profoundly good change. It is the sort of timidity that fears the truth and that would prefer to accommodate, rather than challenge, the very regimes whose end we are called upon to announce. This is the sort of timidity of half-belief and moral corner cutting.

Let me explain further. There is, of course, a sort of moral corner cutting that is due to arrogance, to believing that the rules don't apply to one, or, as the psalmist says, comes from the belief that God doesn't really see, and that what is done in the dark will remain in the dark. Jesus points out the foolishness of that, and the whole point of sending disciples into the world is shed some light on what goes on in dark corners.

But there is also a sort of moral corner cutting that a lot of pretty good people do out of timidity. A lot of people cut corners simply because it is easier to do so, rather than face the truth about the way the world too often goes. For example, I have often found it to be the case with ministers that in trying to help out in a situation they try to manage outcomes. This is to say,

rather than trusting the process and trusting others to do their job, or trusting that what our Lord says is true, namely, that everything will be brought to light, they skirt around the process or manipulate it in order to help somebody or to make things turn out a certain way. Afraid that the truth won't ultimately win, they try to find an easier way to the good. The example of this that screams the loudest is, of course, the cover-up by numerous Catholic bishops of priestly sexual abuse in their dioceses. While certainly such cover-ups themselves were an abuse of power, since power was exercised in squelching complaints and rumors of complaints, they were also actually a series of timid actions, uncourageous actions, actions that spoke of the fear of being found out and what would happen if the truth were known. I truly doubt that any of those involved in such cover-ups actually thought that the actions they were hiding were good or right; that would be monstrous. I do think, though, that they cut moral corners in an attempt to make things come out in the direction of the right and good without going through the truth and without the courage of living the truth. Thus, ironically, they were trying to make the church come out ahead by accommodating themselves to the world. Rather than bringing what was secret to light, they continued to hide it and thought that good would come of it. But it didn't, of course.

That may be the most egregious example, but the same sort of timidity is at work at any point that the church, any church, tries to ease the way to goodness by cutting corners, by trying to make it easier to believe, and failing to have the courage to live out the truth. And whenever that happens the church has a *big* problem, for in trying to protect itself and win friends it cuts the very ground out from under its feet. The problem is that the timidity that accommodates itself to the world and the current regime simply continues the current regime, and never undoes it.

Such timidity betrays the very kingdom that it is supposed to be announcing. In rounding off moral edges we do not get closer to the kingdom of peace, but we simply continue an

economy of violence and lying. Why? Because secrets, including well meant secrets beget secrets, and violence hides in their darkness. By way of example, simply let me point to something a social worker once told me when I was teaching in central Illinois. It is, of course, true, she said, that domestic violence cuts across the social spectrum and can be found everywhere. However, she noted, in rural areas such as surrounded where we lived, it could be worse simply because families didn't move away very often and so rather than light ever being shed on what was going on in dysfunctional families, secrets became the violent heritage of whole families. In time, keeping the secret sometimes even becomes, as it were, the moral economy of the family, and sometimes even of whole towns. Protecting violence becomes an attempt to protect oneself from the violence of revelation. Now, of course, the point of trying to keep secrets is to try to make things easier and better; they are kept because of fear of what might happen if they were discovered. But the more they are kept, the more that economy of violence of which they were born is kept intact and the farther from the kingdom we really are.

So Jesus was absolutely truthful when he told the disciples that the world was going to greet him and them and their message of light and cosmic regime change with resistance and violence. It was predictable. Sure, everybody says they want light and peace and the end of oppression. Sure, everybody wants violence and darkness to end. But how many people actually have the courage to live that way? How many have the courage to live like the master who brings the kingdom? It is thus small wonder that a moral economy based in violence and darkness will always resist and try to bend the message of the new kingdom to the ways of the old one. Because we fear what the light might reveal, we hope that all the secrets will be kept and we will fight to keep them.

And that is why Jesus recommends courage to his disciples when he sends them out.

They would need courage, of course, as he makes plain, to withstand the opposition they were going to encounter. They would need courage to stay the course and shed light in corners that would prefer to stay dark when others would try to undo their work. They would need courage not to run away. But above all they needed most a special sort of courage, a sort of philosophical courage, namely, the courage to fear what ought to be feared and to not fear what is not really fearsome. That is to say they needed the courage of knowing how to live well, when everybody else wants you to live poorly; they needed the courage to fear above all not living well.

That is the sort of courage that the church above all needs today. We do not live in a country where faith is persecuted. Nor do we live in a time such as Abraham or the first disciples did when the gods of the nations who opposed them were so clearly cruel, demanding, voracious and overtly violent. Thus we probably don't need the sort of physical courage that is necessary to withstand physical threats to our well being, since there are very few, if any, such threats. But we do live in a time when faith is being regularly coopted to strictly worldly ends, and when it is being regularly watered down. We do live in a time when we are encouraged to keep secrets, and to be afraid of their being revealed. We live in a time when everybody is afraid of what is not fearsome and fails to be afraid of what kills the soul. We live in a time when even the church itself does not often tell its people that faith actually requires something of them other than showing up once in awhile. And because we do live in such a time, we need above all the courage to be discerning enough to realize that much of what the contemporary world offers as living well is something that feeds the body but kills the soul. Thus we need the courage to live well, even if that means turning our backs on the idols of wealth and all that serving them involves. We need the courage to live truthfully. And if we have that sort of courage, and if we live that way, we will have told the world in no uncertain terms that a new regime has begun.