

Sermon 28 February 2010
Sitting Firmly: Speaking Truth to Power
Philippians 3:17-4:1 and Luke 13:31-35
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Hey, Ana, What is the story about the flag?

Glad you asked. Our church board has just clarified that. Do you see the plaque hanging on the wall beside the flag? It states, "This flag hangs in gratitude to the United States of America that grants us freedom of religious practice and expression." And, of course, there are other values and ideals of this country, for which the flag stands. One we are going to look at this morning is the value that: All people are created equal. All people enjoy equal rights before the law. A noble ideal. A noble ideal, indeed.

Pray with me: May the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of all our hearts, be acceptable to you, O God, who like a mother hen protects us under your wing and values each of us for who we are. Amen.

Consider this scenario... Tired at the end of a long day at work, you board the bus. You look at a vacant seat. ... A nagging apprehension of a possible confrontation gnaws at your mind, but you are tired, so you sit. You allow yourself to feel the relief as you sink down, resting your weary bones. The long ride home won't be so hard now.

Ah, home. Your family awaits your arrival. The Christmas holidays approach, only twenty-four days until Christmas. You smile with the thought.

Suddenly someone breaks into your reverie, speaking loudly. Realizing their harsh words are directed to you, you snap your mind back to the present, back to the bus. The confrontation you wondered about has arrived. You steel yourself....

The Pharisees warn Jesus, "Get away from here. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great who killed all those baby boys when you were born, Herod Antipas wants to kill you!" Herod Antipas wields power over Galilee. When John the Baptist criticizes Herod's corrupt rule, what happens to him? [He loses his head!] Herod is not a nice guy. Now another prophet arrives on Herod's doorstep. And he is a friend of the beheaded John ... cousins, no less! Some folks are saying Jesus is John incarnated. What do you think Herod is thinking about that?! If Herod rid himself of one troubling prophet, what is he likely to do to this new prophet?

So, what threat does Jesus actually pose to Herod? Why Herod's fear? Okay, Jesus casts out demons, cures the sick, turns water into wine. And then, of course, there is feeding the hungry. An impressive reputation, intimidating perhaps to a local politician, but these acts are not capital crimes.

And it is not just Herod Antipas who feels threatened by Jesus. There is Pilate and Caesar, the powers that be. Why so scared? What is it about Jesus' preaching, summed up in the Great Commandment, that makes them tremble? What is the Great Commandment that they are scared of? *To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself.* So, what is the threat in that?

Well, actually, this is pretty threatening stuff to the powers that be. Think about it with me. Jesus is setting down a new order, a new focus for any pledge of allegiance. And any shift of power away from the ruling elite is always threatening – then and now.

According to the Great Commandment of Jesus, what allegiance comes first? Before King. Before nation. ... God. God comes first. Not King Herod Antipas, not governor Pilate, not the Emperor Tiberius Caesar, not Rome, not Jerusalem, not the Empire, not Israel. Placing any of these people or places above God is nothing less than ... idolatry.

The implications for our own time.... God comes first. Not the U.S.A [*gesture to flag*]*—*as much as we may love our country. According to Jesus, it does not come before God, not even equal to God. God comes first. People and places, names and nations, will pass away. But God, God is timeless.

But that is not the only premise of Jesus' Great Commandment that threatens kings and governors. There is more. What is the second part of the Great Commandment? *Love your neighbour.*

I started this sermon by considering a foundational ideal behind this flag, behind this nation –naively posited, perhaps, in our nation's founding document, but nonetheless, an ideal we hold dear: All people are created equal. Now, you and I know this is not literally true. Physically, we are not all equal; we come in all shapes and sizes and capabilities. The Olympic Games illustrate some are better suited for hockey, others for figure skating, some for skiing, and me, for none of the above! Everyone is different. How good is that?

Jesus teaches that, in our diversity, each person is precious to God who like a mother hen broods over us. God sees each of us, in our uniqueness, and values us for who we are. Jesus teaches that God's view point is meant to be our view point, too. No one gets deferential treatment. No one is above the law, AND no one is below the law.

Jesus speaks this truth to the powers that be – powers who want to protect their power and wealth and not be responsible for the welfare of others. And those "others" ...over time they recognize Jesus' truth, the assurance of God's love for them. And they challenge the unjust systems and societies that oppress and marginalize them. A threat, you better believe it. These enlightened and empowered "others" turn over the comfortable world of the Herods and Ceasers. Colonists in the Americas, Africa and Asia shed the shackles of English, French, Spanish and Portuguese empires. Prime ministers and presidents emancipate slaves. Labourers unite to battle the oppression of greedy entrepreneurs and industrialists. Jesus' truth empowers the "other" to stand firmly for justice.

Often it feels to me as though we take two steps forward and one large step back fighting battles against injustice, over and over again. The Christian theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, in his book "Moral Man and Immoral Society," offers this explanation. As individuals we have a moral compass—we know right from wrong. We know the golden rule, "Do unto others as... you would have them do unto you." But as corporate bodies, as states and societies, we lose our moral compasses, we forget that God, goodness, comes first, and we become A-moral at best and outright *immoral* at worst. One need only pick up

the newspaper and read of Toyota's cost-cutting corporate practices as they secretly slashed safety features to realize the truth of Niebuhr's words. Governments—made up of individuals, men and women, who know right from wrong—notoriously set policies which adversely affect the “other”, the weakest among us, the marginalized, the outcasts. Unlike a watchful hen brooding over her nest, governments and groups too often keep the nest tidy by pushing some folks out, excluding them, ignoring them.

Sarah Johnson's [*signify Sarah in the pew*] report, which appears in our March KCC *Good News*, relates how Christians, Muslims, Jews and others gathered for the Interfaith Advocacy Day in Olympia to voice their concerns to the powers that be in our state government. Gathered to voice the values we hold -- our concern for old and young, for low-income citizens, at-risk pregnant women, our precious and fragile environment. At that Interfaith Day rally, empowered by Jesus' example and God's love, Sarah and others, on our behalf, sat firmly for justice, spoke truth to power, confronting the powers that be.

Back on the bus, someone addresses you loudly. You snap to attention. The confrontation arrives. “Lady! Get out of that seat. You know your kind belongs in the... back of the bus. This here seat is for white folks!”

February is Women in Mission and Ministry month at KCC and February is also Black History month. How fitting to remember someone sitting firmly for justice, speaking truth to power 55 years ago. And that someone would be...? *Rosa Parks!*

Sitting firm for justice...Speaking truth to power, not easy. Rosa Parks...What happened to her? Arrested. Jesus...what happened to him? Arrested and tortured, and finally executed... crucified. Arrest alone scares me. (Earlier this week Tod visited King County Jail, a place to be avoided), never mind torture and execution.

But, we are followers of Jesus' Way. This Lenten Season, may we be willing to sit firmly with the teachings and values of Jesus. May we practice them in our daily lives. May we, like John, like Jesus, like Rosa Parks, be emboldened to confront corrupt powers that hold the reigns over people.

For the reign of God is now, in you, in me, and in our midst. Over, under and around us all, God broods like a mother hen. Let God be first.

Pray with me...

God, we pledge allegiance to you, to your ways of peace and justice. Empower us to sit firmly where power needs to shift. Embolden us to voice the cries of the helpless and confront the corrupt powers that be. Show us our own participation in corrupt power, and help us change, moving ever closer to the loving, caring people you call us to be. As followers of Jesus of Nazareth who gave his life, we pray. Amen.