

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 12, 2015
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Where the Shoe Pinches Your Foot—A Call to Risky Religion

When I was a student in seminary, my homiletics professor once said, “Always preach the point in scripture where the shoe pinches your foot.” As I read over the lectionary for this week, I was tempted to focus on the comforting passage from Ephesians, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing.” But I kept being drawn back to the horrific story of John the Baptist’s beheading. This tragic narrative is both disturbing and compelling. Exposing the shadow side of the Christian journey, we witness the risks of confronting power in the name of love. Our story as a people of faith does not always leave us feeling safe and reassured.

If we were to read this narrative dispassionately as history or even as a morality tale, we might miss its very purpose. What pinches my foot is the notion of putting myself on the line for my faith. Would I push through fear or inertia to challenge a world that is often unjust? In our modern day perhaps the question is not, what am I willing to die for, but for what am I willing to live?

Mark’s gospel was most likely written just after the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple. If this tale of John’s untimely death were the last word, it would seem a cruel jab at a people already disheartened and afraid. Mark places this story just after Jesus sent out his disciples into the mission field. It is a reminder that the Christian message can be subversive and unwelcome, especially when prophetic faith clashes with political power. John’s beheading was the end of innocence for that little band of disciples. His death foreshadowed Jesus’ death at the hands of the authorities, and a dangerous road ahead for Jesus’ followers.

From the beginning of his ministry, John was called to be a truth teller, to prepare the way. This wild-eyed prophet was an outspoken figure with a fiery message of repentance. In a time of widespread corruption and abuse of power, his edgy words pierced any notions of peace amidst the people. But for those on the margins of life, John stirred up hope of a coming king who would redeem their suffering. It is little wonder that John’s words echoed in Herod’s ears as he learned of this man who cast out demons and performed miracles of healing. Who was this man, Jesus, who also spoke truth to power?

Today we are far less likely to stir up trouble in the name of religion. At least the mainline church is more apt to stay in our comfort zone, to practice a faith that involves doing good deeds

for others and spreading a gospel of love. Don't get me wrong, sowing seeds of love is a very worthy endeavor. I just mean that we don't often enter into risky religion or push ourselves spiritually to take one step beyond where we feel safe. But the narrative today reminds us that we are also called to be agents of change and to disturb the peace of those who might oppress. This underbelly of the discipleship journey reveals hard truths: that the world resists change and the costs can be high. Walking in solidarity with the disenfranchised may not be comfortable, but it is transformative.

This kind of faith journey requires that we look beyond the gospel story to remember that suffering and death never has the final word. Jesus came so that there could be a better end to the story of the world. When our temples are destroyed or what we have constructed in our own lives comes apart, we take comfort in the promise of resurrection. God's tenacious love comes to redeem us and to inspire us to create a new story.

Oscar Romero was a prominent Roman Catholic priest in El Salvador during the 1960s and 70's, becoming Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977. Romero's rise in the Catholic hierarchy coincided with a period of dramatic change in the Latin American Church. The region's bishops resolved to abandon the Church's traditional role as defender of the status quo and to side with the poor in their struggle for social justice.

After witnessing countless violations of human rights, Romero began to speak out on behalf of the poor. As he denounced the violence of El Salvador's civil war and the deeply-rooted patterns of injustice, he gathered an increasing following. But in a country where dissent was regarded as subversion, Romero was considered dangerous. He became known as the "Voice of the Voiceless."

Romero's campaign for human rights won him a Nobel Peace Prize nomination and he had many enemies. On March 24, 1980, an assassin fired from the door of the chapel where Romero was celebrating mass and he was killed. The archbishop spoke of the danger in his ministry and threats on his life, "As a Christian," he remarked, "I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I shall rise again in the hearts of the Salvadoran people."

Trusting that resurrection prevails gives us the courage to claim our calling and purpose. We must each reckon with what directs the course of our lives and discern if we are living into God's purposes. We can look to the encouraging words of Ephesians to inspire us to do the hard work of the kingdom. The epistle today says that we have been given an extraordinary inheritance so that we might live as God's children with God's purpose- to gather up all things in Him to redeem the world.

For what will we live? Will ours be a safe journey or will we practice risky religion that calls us to places on the margins, or asks us to have vision beyond our fears? I pray that we respond to the shoe that pinches our foot with the same tenacious love God has given us. This meditation was written for Oscar Romero:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen