



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Sermon by Pastor Jami Anderson, May 15, 2011

These words were spoken by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – “Cowardice asks the question, ‘Is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question, ‘Is it politic?’ But conscience asks the question, ‘Is it right?’ And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but because conscience tells one it is right.”

And then you suffer. And then you suffer. At least that was certainly the experience in Martin Luther King Jr’s life. I remember suffering once for doing right. I remember it because at the time I thought of this Bible verse from first Peter about enduring when you do right, and I remembered the words of Jesus when he told us that any who followed him would find themselves hated. Following Jesus guaranteed one a life of making choices and taking actions that could and probably would lead to suffering and the hatred or dislike of others.

The defining experience for me was when I undertook the project of finding funding for and the opening of a homeless shelter in Kearney, Nebraska. When we moved there I soon saw and learned there was a man who walked the streets of the town and slept wherever he could. He was the town’s “token” and visible homeless person. One evening in late fall I saw him walk by our home in the cold and snow and I knew deep in my heart that everyone should have a warm and safe place to sleep. We all need shelter from the storms. I was working as a grant writer for a Community Action Agency, an organization focused on issues of poverty. When I asked my boss about working towards opening a homeless shelter, she gave me her permission to pursue funding avenues, I think secretly doubting that it would happen.

Well it did happen. I found and gathered together other concerned agencies and individuals and we gathered up state and federal funds to open a simple shelter. That work took over a year and during that time I met detractors and opposition to the idea. For example, the Mayor of the town and Majors at the Salvation Army told me that they sent the homeless on to other towns – no help was to be offered in Kearney. Because, then of course, those homeless people might just stay around and we couldn’t have that!

But once we received the huge federal HUD grant, then trouble really started. I learned that the town required a conditional use permit for allowing property to be used as a shelter. Three times we went through the process of applying for and having the public hearings for property to be granted a permit. Two times we were denied and each time brought out a frenzy of neighborhood protest meetings and spots on the local tv and radio news and statements at the public meetings about how I was ruining the town. In fact, it was while on the way to yet another angry neighborhood meeting that I reflected on the Bible verses and thought carefully about suffering and witness. Many nights I shed tears and thought about quitting. But when the day finally came that we opened our simple shelter – down by the railroad tracks – where we

were told to find a place where “those people” could go. But on the day of our opening, even the Mayor spoke at the event and talked about the vision of people who worked to do what they knew to be right.

Suffering for doing what is right. I imagine it will or has happened to all of you. I know there are stories of times you have taken a stance or action that met with dislike or disapproval or caused uproar with friends and family. And in some measure or other we suffer for it. But I put to you that our suffering has not yet been unto death. We may lose some friends, we may not have all of the possessions that others have, we may be told that our life is not as fun as others, we may not get a job we want, or lose a job – but none of us have suffered unto death.

And that is a possibility when doing what we know to be right, but it is also a dangerous way to use this Bible verse from first Peter. “But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval....When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.”

Let me say to you today, be careful about making the decision about what you are doing as being right. Knowing what it is to do that is right comes from the guidance of God, not humankind. Doing what is right leads to life for others, not destruction, not harm, not the allowing of others to do evil and we stand by - because our suffering will prove to be the witness. We must always listen and obey the still, small voice that says to us, “This is the way, walk in it.” It is the voice of the good shepherd, it is the voice that guides us along right pathways for his Name’s sake, it is the voice that offers love of you and all others. It is a voice we must take time and have silence in order to hear. Then we are prepared to witness and speak the words of justice to the powers that undermine life.

We are never to suffer abuse and torture and suffering because of merely being who we are or without our empowerment coming from God’s guidance. I speak here about the treatment of whole groups of people for being African Americans, or any other race or nationality. I speak about the spouse that says, “It is right for me to honor my marriage vows, so I will accept this abuse.” I am speaking about powers and programs and governments that oppress and mistreat human beings because they can. Suffering in those instances is never right.

I read a book during seminary titled, “Torture and Eucharist.” The issues presented in it focused on the teaching of and control of the Roman Catholic church during the reign of General Pinochet in Chile during the 1970’s until 1990. Pinochet’s military regularly disappeared and tortured people while the church gave the message that those soldiers may harm the body but not the spirit, not the soul, and if you died, well, then, you were now at peace and in a better place.

Finally, finally, groups of people began to oppose that message and began to work against the brutal treatment of the poor and the small land owners. The suffering of our bodies is not acceptable when it is done without our choice, when we are taught that our bodies are separate from and not as important as our souls, or our spirits. No, the vast abuse and disappearing of the visible and real Body of Christ is never acceptable and must be resisted.

In Chile, the resistance took three stances. First, some church leaders began to teach that the idea of martyrdom is not about the mass killing of people and they sought to excommunicate the military leaders. Then, groups within and without the church came together to offer a wide range of programs such as legal assistance, food, jobs, cooperatives. They formed a caring social network from which came the word, *solidaridad*, solidarity, working together. Finally, a group of nuns, priests, and laypeople took to the streets with public denunciations against the torture. They used their bodies to block traffic while they sang and performed chants naming those who had disappeared. Together people became the true body of Christ, bringing to light the suffering of others by making that suffering visible in their own bodies and lives.

That is what you see continued today in places like Syria, and Libya, and the Sudan, and other nations throughout Africa.

When you hear the voice of Jesus and follow you are brought into the fold and there will be pasture and comfort and guidance. There will also be enemies and hard times as a witness in this world. So, let us be brave and of good courage and support one another.

I close with St. Theresa's Prayer:

Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands. Yours are the feet. Yours are the eyes. You are His body. Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.