

The Second Sunday of Lent  
February 21, 2016

***"A Fox in the Hen House"***  
*by Mary Anne Biggs*  
Philippians 3:17-4:1 ~ Luke 13:31-35

While I was attending seminary in Chicago we would, upon occasion, have to deal with Fred Phelps when he would rail against our course curriculum. I have spoken to you before about him ... but to refresh your memory ... he was a self-appointed preacher of an independent church based in Topeka, Kansas ... which is notorious for its anti-gay protests, claiming that most natural disasters and terrorist attacks are God's punishment for a society that tolerates homosexuality. His church has 71 confirmed members, 60 of whom are related to Phelps. Despite their small size, he and his followers garnered nation-wide publicity through the slogans that he used against people he deemed sinful, including "God Hates Fags," and "Thank God for Dead Soldiers.

Phelps and his followers frequently picketed various events, especially military funerals, gay pride gatherings, high-profile political gatherings, and even Christian gatherings and concerts with which he had no affiliation ... arguing that it was their sacred duty to warn others of God's anger ... stating that homosexuality and the social acceptance of it have doomed most of the world to eternal damnation.

For the most part when he would come to my seminary we would ignore this lunatic, oops, did I just say that? But I have to admit that his ranting did draw a crowd and at times I felt a little persecuted. It made me want to throttle him ... to explain to him in no uncertain terms how wrong ... how stupid ... how evil he was. I was very proud of my school ... not only is it theologically progressive, but it is also a caring community that consistently offers support to a hurting world. It made me furious and sad that any time we made the newscast in Chicago it was always because Fred Phelps was on hand, shouting how the United Church of Christ is doing the devil's work.

Now I'm always quick to say that I haven't really suffered very much for the unpopular stands that our church has embraced. I've only had my feelings hurt and that's a very small price to pay in comparison to the prophets and martyrs of our faith ... but maybe I can understand better than before what they faced as they stood for God in an ungodly world.

The simple sad truth is this ... if you stand for God's truth ... God's justice ... God's love in this world, you will have opposition. There are always people whose power or profits are threatened by people being freed from poverty, addiction, materialism, or oppression. There are always those who prefer violence and hostility to reconciliation and peace. The list is long and tragic of messengers from God who were persecuted for righteousness' sake ... the Hebrew prophets from Elijah through John the Baptist ... the New Testament martyrs from Stephen to Peter and Paul ...

and the post-biblical martyrs from Polycarp through Martin Luther King and Oscar Romero. And the chief among all of these ... is our Lord himself.

Jesus was moving towards Jerusalem with his disciples when he got a death threat: *"Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."* It was no idle threat, for this same Herod had killed Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, not all that long before. Jesus replied by calling Herod a fox. The fox is legendary in many cultures as a sly and conniving animal who robs chicken coops. But in Israel Kings preferred to think themselves the mighty lion, in memory of King David, the Lion of Judah. So Jesus was insulting Herod. Herod was a small fry in the wider political scene, not a mighty lion but an egg-suckin' fox. Herod was a minor player on God's stage. He was a small part of the political intrigue centered in Jerusalem ... where all the foxes of the High Priest and the Sanhedrin and the strident political parties and the Roman Procurator and his soldiers played a deadly game of power.

Jesus recognized the risk of walking into that arena ... of going up to that city where God had reached out to Israel so many times ... only to be rejected. He was warned about Herod, but he knew that the danger lay in *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"* (Luke 13:34). We hear the passion, the anger and the sadness and the love Jesus felt for Jerusalem and its people. Not long after this Luke tells us,

*As (Jesus) came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes" (Luke 19:41-42).*

The gospels tell us of only two times when Jesus cried. He was not a weepy kind of guy ... but when he came to the tomb of his dear friend Lazarus and saw what death does to families and friends, Jesus wept (John 11:35). And when he stood over the city of Jerusalem and thought of the fate that its resistance to God and its preference for violence would bring, he was moved to tears. And I think what grieved him most was the way God's own beloved people resisted the presence of God and chose violence instead: *"If you, even you, (especially you, you of all people) had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!"* Of all the places in the world, the so-called "holy city of Jerusalem" ... the exalted Zion of the Psalms ... the magnificent Temple of Israel's God where God was enthroned in the holy of holies was not a habitat for Divinity ... it was not a place where God could feel at home.

Was Jesus being anti-Semitic in picking on Jerusalem? Of course not. Jesus was not anti-Semitic. He was a Jew himself. Was he suggesting that Jerusalem was the only place in this world where God is not welcome and goodness is resisted? Of course not. Surely the same resistance to God and preference for violence can be found in Washington, D.C., and Madison, Wisconsin, and every capital city on the planet. Surely the same resistance to God and preference for violence can be found in every human city and tribe and heart. The war between good and evil finds its battlefields in every place, indeed, in every life.

But take note of this ... God has enemies ... and those who would serve God will have enemies, too. The Bible speaks often of the enemies of God's people and God's ways. Look at our Epistle reading today.

The Apostle Paul tells the Philippians:

*For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things (Phili. 3:18-19).*

And we need only look at the life of Christ to see how God is opposed.

We expect opposition from idolatrous powers. We expect resistance from those who have given themselves over to evil. But what makes us furious ... what make us want to throttle them ... and to explain to them in no uncertain terms how wrong ... how stupid ... how evil they are ... are the people who oppose God vociferously and violently in God's own name.

I don't want to sound paranoid, but I think it's important to tell you that following Christ and doing God's work in the world is a dangerous business. Sadly, the church has usually so eloquently embodied its *culture* rather than its *Christ* that it has been a while since many people think it offensive or find anything objectionable about it. I think we all need to ask ourselves ... if I were accused of being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict me?

But still, when people slander our church or threaten us ... or attack our church members and our families in any way ... we feel furious. It makes us want to throttle them ... explain to them in no uncertain terms how wrong ... how stupid ... how evil they are. But if we do, we show that we don't know the things that make peace, either. The greatest danger is that we, God's own people, should become enemies of God in the ways we behave or in how we justify our beliefs. We can list the atrocities of our enemies and invoke God's name against them. But do we see the enemy within and the ways we fail to build a habitat for Divinity in our own hearts and homes and community ... a place where God feels at home? And how can we build a habitat for humanity if we cannot build a habitat for Divinity ... where Christ can lead God's people to life? How far are we willing to go to be different from our culture when our culture does evil ... especially when it does evil in God's name? And how shall we go about opposing what isn't right?

Jesus gets a death threat from Herod and he considers what awaits him in Jerusalem. Now look at the way Jesus responds to this opposition. He doesn't just teach "love your enemies;" he practices it! He does not back off or avoid standing for what is right. But he does not respond to violence with violence ... he doesn't imitate the enemy in his conduct. He weeps for those who oppose him. He reaches out like a mother hen to protect her chicks from the foxes. And isn't that a fabulous image of God, the cosmic Mother Hen! Writes Barbara Brown Taylor:

*If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world -- wings spread, breast exposed -- but if you mean*

*what you say, then this is how you stand. Jesus won't be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first.*

And this is how Jesus stood, and how Jesus died, arms open, breast exposed, praying, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*"

Let us stand for what is right and bear witness for the love of God for all persons. Let us examine ourselves to see how we may be enemies of God by participating in the world's ways through the world's means ... which are mean. Let us stand for what's right with courage ... all the while praying that God will correct us where we may be wrong. And when we are opposed, let us not react with violence in speech or deed or hostility of any kind ... for if we do, we will no longer be following Jesus. Instead, let us open our arms and open our hearts ... let us forgive our enemies and by God's help, love them. Let us be like Christ, weeping for those who oppose us and understanding their fears ... their bondage to the deathly ways of the world ... as we model the life ways of Christ ... who did not fear even death because he knew God would bring resurrection. Let us gather under the outstretched arms of the crucified Christ and remember ... so that we might follow his example into life and make a space in the world where God can feel at home.

May we pray?

O Lord. As you have loved us, fill us with your love. As you have forgiven us, fill us with your forgiveness. As you have called us, help us to follow you to your ends ... by your means, in grace. Amen.