

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Mission: The Danger
July 12, 2020
The Rev. Dr. John Judson

Exodus 5:1-9; Matthew 10:16-25

My former church had begun a program of teaching people about how to share their faith. We believed it was important for everyone to be able to articulate what they believed and why they believed it. As we went searching for resources, one of our members said that he had a long time friend who had his own evangelism ministry. The friend had spent most of his adult life traveling the world speaking at churches, sharing his faith and helping others learn how to do the same. The session thought it would be wonderful to have someone with this kind of experience teach us how to do the same. The evangelist, as I will call him, was with us for a weekend. He told many great stories of helping people around the world know who Jesus was. But the bottom line of all that he was saying was that, our only task was to help people say, “Jesus is my Lord and Savior.” Our task was not to help people understand what they meant. It was merely to get them to say the words so they could go to heaven. At the end of his last teaching time, I went up to him and asked, “But shouldn’t we tell these people what it means to follow? Or that following can be difficult and for some of them, even dangerous?” His reply was instantaneous. “No,” he replied, “Because if we do they might not want to follow Jesus.” The evangelist did have a point, which begs the question this morning, why did Jesus tell his followers that their mission was going to be dangerous. This doesn’t seem to be a great way to recruit followers.

Jesus is nothing if not blunt in this moment when he is first sending his followers out into the world to tell people about the incoming Kingdom of Heaven. He tells them that they will be handed over to secular governments and be flogged by religious leaders. They will be dragged before political leaders. They will be betrayed. Families will be torn apart. They might be put to death. And they will be hated because of their message of peace and justice for the world and for God’s people. Jesus is pulling no punches with his disciples. He is very clear that there is a cost to the mission of telling the world that they ought to see every human being as a child of God; that they ought to treat every human being as a child of God and that every child of God ought to have equal access to the goods and benefits of society. These are the heart of Biblical justice and is the heart of the Kingdom of Heaven. This was, by the way, a mission that the early church would embody in its life and work. Why would Jesus not put a more positive spin on things? Why was he so honest about the cost of discipleship? The answer is two fold.

First, Jesus tells them the truth because it will let his followers know that this mission in which they are engaged is the real deal. It is the in-breaking of the Kingdom of Heaven. This is so because in the time of Jesus and his disciples there were numerous religious books in circulation that spoke of the coming of the Kingdom, as arriving in and through dangerous and difficult times, in which the people of God would pay a price for their faithfulness. These books, such as Second Esdras, Jubilees, Enoch and the Apocalypse of Baruch did not paint a picture of an easy, angelic intervention in which everything was suddenly OK. They painted a picture of danger and even death. They echoed the lives of the earlier prophets such as Elijah who had to run for his life and Jeremiah who was threatened with execution and thrown into a well to die; Both for advocating justice in the face of injustice. By being brutally honest with his followers, Jesus was tapping into these traditions and pointing to their mission as one that is in-line with both scripture and tradition. This is a dangerous mission.

Second, Jesus tells them the truth because it was the truth. What he describes would be their future. Jesus understood the world and the way it worked. His disciples understood the world and the way it worked. They understood that those in power never wanted to freely give up their power and invite others into the benefits of society. They understood that those who had political power believed that they were better than others and therefore were allowed to lie, cheat, steal and abuse. They understood that those in power believed that they had the right to oppress those who lived under their reign and to force the governed into unwilling obedience. They understood that this was the way of both secular and religious leaders. They understood that seeking justice would not make them popular with the powers that be. They also understood that by proclaiming God's Kingdom, it would divide their families and possibly even get them killed. And as we all know, this would be the fate of Jesus himself, thought by his family to have lost his mind, hated by the religious leaders because they questioned their authority and executed by the Romans because even a heavenly kingdom of peace and justice was not acceptable if it threatened Roman rule. This is a dangerous mission.

If we want to see this in more modern terms all we have to do is look at the struggle for justice for Africans who were brought here to this country as slaves. Though there are far too many stories to tell of the danger of working for peace and justice I want to simply offer two. The first took place on September 4, 1957. On that day Elizabeth Eckford arrived at her new school, Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas. She was to be one of the first black students to attend the school after they had won a federal suit, following *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. What she did not realize was that not only had the governor called out the National Guard to prevent her and her friends from entering the school, but that there would be hundreds of white men and women present to yell at her, spit on her and threaten her. Only after President Eisenhower ordered the National Guard back to their barracks and brought in the 101st Airborne, were the nine black students allowed into the school...but even then they faced the barrage of hate and intimidation each day they attended. The second story comes from this past week. Vauxx Booker had gone to a local lake outside of Bloomington Indiana on the 4th of July to watch fireworks. As he walked to the lake, several white men told him he was trespassing on their land. Not knowing he was actually on park property, he apologized and continued to the lake. Later that evening, the same group of white men blocked off the public beach front and were refusing to allow black men and women to walk on public property. Vauxx went over to try and straighten things out. Tempers flared and soon the white men attacked Vauxx. They first pinned him to the ground, kicked him and then pinned him against a tree. One of the men told the others to go and bring a noose. Vauxx says the only reason he is not a hash-tag is because people came up, videoed the incident and yelled at the white men to stop. One would want to believe that working for peace and justice in our time would be easy, but it is not. This is a dangerous mission.

Jesus was brutally honest because he understood the way the world worked. This is why he told his followers that they were being sent out as sheep among wolves; so they were to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. They were to be wise as servants, understanding the way the world worked; where the powerful did not desire justice, only control. But they were also supposed to be as innocent as doves, meaning their task was not taking revenge or seeking power so they could be as oppressive as those who oppressed them. They were to be citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, bringing justice for all. But the question this morning is, what about us? I ask that because there are two kinds of people in this world, spectators and participants. I say this in light of what happened to Booker. There were bystanders who just watched as his life was threatened and there were those who spoke up, the participants. My sense is that most of us, including yours truly are more comfortable with being bystanders. It is far more comfortable to look on from the outside and bemoan the problems of racial injustice. I can say that is true for me. I grew up in a comfortable, middle class, white home, trained at great schools and a wonderful

seminary. I was trained to be a Biblical interpreter, spiritual counselor and hospital visitor. Those tasks are comfortable for me, but inviting people to uncomfortable and dangerous missions was not on the syllabus. Yet there are those moments when scripture simply refuses to allow me to be comfortable.

The first was in my previous church in San Antonio, when the San Antonio city council “outlawed” homelessness. They made it a crime to sleep on the streets or in parks. If you did you could be arrested, fined and jailed. I worked with church members, other pastors and churches to lobby city hall not just to change the law but to create an alternative housing program for the homeless...one that has become a model for other cities.

The second, is now, with the Black Lives Matter movement. I believe this movement is a cry for Biblical justice for black Americans. It is a moment when we are called to become more than bystanders looking on and saying, “Isn’t racial injustice a shame,” and instead become participants who work to make a difference in world; first by examining our own prejudices and beliefs about race and racism and then work for change as members of Everybody’s Church.

My challenge for you for this week then is this, that you pray how you can move from bystander to participant and work for God’s Kingdom justice in the world around you.