

Sermon, 'The Paradox of Hope', 6-14-2015

Old Testament: Lamentations 3:19-24

New Testament: Luke 14:27-33.

Our decisions and their subsequent commitments carry with them responsibilities. Prior to my freshman year at the University of Colorado I had no clue who I was or where I was going. I was just following my friends and the crowd to CU. That was the cool place to go at the time.

Of course, everybody liked to ask, 'What is your major'? I thought it would be good to enter the college of Arts and Sciences, or as we liked to call it, Arts and Parties. History would be my major and I would be a high school teacher. I certainly had a ways to go on the trajectory toward maturity.

My college years began during the first years of the Viet Nam war. The draft was in full swing. So I signed up for Air Force ROTC. I would serve my country the extended time of four years beyond college. Besides, I was seeing what was happening to my friends who were drafted and get scuttled into the Army infantry. Some never made it home.

The Air Force had its attraction for me. I had grown up near Malmstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls, Montana. As a child I had watched the fighter jets fly daily over my home. I dreamed of being up there with them someday.

Three weeks before the fall semester began, something I can't explain happened. Life is full have unexplained mysteries. Events may occur that redirect us and alter the course of our lives. I was attending a Beatle's concert at the Red Rocks outdoor Amphitheatre outside Denver. With me were friends who had completed their first year in the College of Music at CU. During the course of the evening I experienced this unexplained urge to change my major. I would enter the College of Music.

Life is full of circuitous routes. Each fork in the road may alter the trajectory of our lives. I didn't have a clue where this choice would lead. But I did know it would take me to a different place than my former decision. I had to weigh the choices and consequences. I think Craig Barnes is correct; "Life is not something we create. It is something we receive, created by God" (Barnes, 'When God Interrupts', p.111). Choices come to us that we do not expect, pointing us in very different directions.

Isn't Jesus attempting to get us to stop and think about those decisions and weigh their outcomes? The context of Jesus' words on the cost of discipleship is a dinner party. He is dining at a house of a leader of the Pharisee party on a Sabbath. During the course of the evening Luke tells us that a man who has dropsy approaches Jesus who takes him, heals him, and sends him away. This causes a discussion of what is allowable to do on the Sabbath. Jesus makes points with the crowd, but not his host.

Jesus then uses the occasion to talk about the nature of humility and hospitality. He introduces the parable of the Great Dinner, a story about a person who invites people to a dinner party who make excuses not to attend. After a couple of RSVP regrets the person holding the banquet gets angry. His slaves are told to go into the streets, invite and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.

He wanted his house filled. Jesus ends the parable by saying, “none of those who were invited will taste my dinner” (Luke 14:15-24).

At this point in the evening’s dinner conversation Jesus turns to the people and says, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me, cannot be my disciple”. Then he gets the people personally involved in the conversation. “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?” (vs.28)

Vaclav Havel became the internationally famous president of the free Czech Republic. To his own people he was known as a playwright, a writer who spoke truth to power, the power of Soviet totalitarianism, and a dissident and founder of the Charter 77 Movement.

For the latter he received two prison sentences. During his imprisonment he wrote ‘Letters to Olga’. They were about a classical hero on a quest. Havel realizes that he has mastered the physical difficulties of prison. However, he is faced with the harder struggle of the meaning of life. Central to all the 144 letters is the theme of responsibility as the key to human identity.

“Human responsibility, as the word itself suggests, is responsibility to something. But to what? What is this omnipresent, omnipotent, and undeceivable instance of authority, and where in fact does it reside? He insists that it is from someone eternal, who through himself makes me eternal as well....someone to whom I relate entirely and for whom, ultimately, I would do everything. At the same time, the ‘someone’ addresses me directly and personally. But who is it? God? Responsibility does establish identity, but we are not responsible because of our identity; instead we have an identity because we are responsible” (Os Guinness, ‘The Call’, pp. 18-19).

Taking up the cross of Christ and following Christ gives us an identity. That choice to take up the cross and follow Jesus cost 22 Egyptian laborers their lives. You recall the recent image of these 22 Christians, heads covered and bowed, their heads cut off by their ISIS captors.

As you know, we support the Gormans, currently serving in Egypt as our PCUSA mission coworkers. We correspond with them and their ministry through our World Mission committee. They have relayed the request by the Christians in Egypt to pray for their faithfulness, reminding us that we stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Christ no matter where they are in the world. They stress that ‘your prayer is our prayer’. As Paul writes, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15).

The Egyptian Christian movement dates back to St. Mark in Alexandria. They are known as ‘Coptic’ Christians, Coptic meaning Egyptian. By 1041, during what is known as the ‘Great East West Schism’, Egypt became part of the Eastern Orthodox Church tradition. They have had a history of persecution for their steadfast faith and beliefs in Christ while refusing to worship the Roman Emperors.

Listening to a video feed sent to us through our denomination, entitled ‘Blessed Be My People Egypt’, I was impressed by several things. The presenter, Anne Emile Zati, a professor from Cairo, currently teaching at Calvin College, spoke of the reality of counting the cost in following Christ. She described the

Egyptian Christians who were beheaded as laborers who found work in the nation of Libya. They were taught throughout their lives that Christ comes first. The most important thing is not to deny the faith and that Jesus is the most important thing. In other words, they understood the cost of discipleship, and had accepted Jesus' invitation to "bear his own cross and come after me". They accepted their fate, willing to die for their faith and pay the price. As they prepared to die they could be heard praying, "Save us Jesus..."

Zati pointed out that the Coptic Church is known as 'people of the Cross'. They show us the difference between a real faith and a false faith. Living in a context of persecution and oppression, she raises the question of theodicy, 'Does Jesus not care about the church in the Middle East?'

Her answer is yes. She talks about the importance to the Egyptian Christians of Jesus' invitation to 'carry the cross and follow him'. The Cross is about God coming into the suffering of our lives and identifying with us and us with God. It is not about God obsessing over us getting to God, but God coming to us.

Therefore submission to God through the suffering of being a persecuted minority group places the question of Jesus' invitation to count the cost in real world terms. The core of what the church is about does not get defined by one's busyness and participation in programs. The Coptics are a group of believers who have counted the cost and continue to pay the price of their obedience. They have been and are perseverant and aware of the spiritual warfare that engages them.

What struck me, however, was the response to the beheadings. Zati made the point that though ISIS sought to use the video of the beheading to intimidate, the church saw the execution and was inspired. Why? Those Christians had been faithful, suffering the ultimate price of their faith. They had counted the cost. As we often observe, the martyrs are the seed of the faith. In oppression and opposition Jesus' followers grow stronger.

For us these matters can be more subtle in an affluent culture. Counting the cost for us takes on a different face. Often our greatest foes lie ambushed within ourselves. But Jesus' invitation is no less one that is extended to us as well. We weigh the costs of lifestyle issues, use of wealth, and choices to be willing to listen to God's call upon our lives or to ignore that voice. But as someone has said, there is also a cost of non-discipleship. Havel is right, the things we choose to do bear with them responsibilities and it is those responsibilities that we embrace that define us.

Our Christian brothers and sisters in Egypt are asking us to pray for them. They need strength to persevere, to be granted Christ's strength in their weakness. They desire us to pray that their eyes would be open to God and that they would count the cost and be obedient to what God is asking them to do, even to know what God wants them to do.

Prayer for them is described as their lifeline. They ask that we pray for their enemies. As people of the Cross we witness Jesus' cross as a means of redemption for all peoples and nations. They require that we get to know them and their culture. Anne Emile Kati challenged us to leave our places of order and predictability and go to those places where Jesus goes, places of darkness, hurt, and oppression. We go there to bring the light of his hope and love.

We discover within Jesus' invitation a paradox of hope. Because of the cross, we have hope. If God through Jesus' resurrection defeats death and brings strength and victory out of ultimate human weakness, then what might God do with the apparent failures and hardships of our own lives? (Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.104).

And so such a vile execution can inspire a church only on the basis of this hope. What ISIS did in fact unmasked their own violence and injustice. Moral power can have a disarming effect. One need look no further than the racist sheriffs who locked Martin Luther King Jr. in jail, the Soviets who deported Solzhenitsyn, the Czechs who imprisoned Vaclav Havel, or the South African authorities who imprisoned Mandela. They, along with ISIS, thought that they were solving a problem. And it was no different than what Jesus' host at a dinner party attempted to do (Yancey, p.103).

Our identity does emerge out of those choices we make and the responsibilities which follow. Just as I learned early, the choices I made required that I count the cost and accept the responsibilities that followed. At an early age our Egyptian brothers and sisters made faith choices that were acted out in the face of an enemy who offered temporal life if they renounced Jesus.

And so I believe that Havel had it right when he saw the ultimate meaning of life tied to our response to that divine voice. And we believe that divine voice addresses us in the person of Christ.