

Praying with Your Legs

sermon digest

May 3, 2009

John 10:11-18; I John 3:16-24

Susan Burgess Parrish

As we were preparing for the service today, Rodney gave me a book of quotes showing me one from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the world renowned theologian and philosopher. I had forgotten the quote from previously being aware of it. The context was that this Jewish theologian was a strong advocate for Civil Rights and became quite noted for his work with Martin Luther King with whom he shared a deep friendship. It is said of him that during the March to Montgomery from Selma, AL, as he joined with Martin Luther King and the other leaders on the front row of the line, walking for miles, that he leaned over to his neighbor and said that felt like he was "praying with his legs."

Interesting comment. He was acting out what he wanted to see happen in the world, what he felt God was calling him to do. His actions were done in response to what he believed and felt he received from God.

Practice what you preach. Growing up, that was a common statement around my house. Since Daddy was a preacher, I guess my parents thought it might take on special meaning I guess. It was important to my parents that I be consistent to what I said I believed. Granted, early on, it was more about what they believed and how they wanted me to act. But as I got older and began to adopt...and adapt, some of the teachings as my own, I began to understand the hypocrisy of the day and the importance of personal integrity and the commitment to making a difference.

The passages from the Lectionary read today call our attention to this and more.

I was at one of our completed house construction sites yesterday. We had a group of folks from Y-12 there to help us do the landscaping around the houses and plant the plants that the families had chosen. As so often happens, one of the volunteers looked at our beautiful homes and asked, "about how long will a family live in one of these houses and what do you do with the house when they move out?" Questions like that are easy for me to answer because they tell me that the person doesn't really understand our families or our system. As has been my experience, people seem to think that our families have the same transitory nature with homeownership as their middle class counterparts – you buy one, stay there for a couple of years, then you buy a bigger or different one and move on. I told him that for these families, to "build" their house was something different from what he or I would do if we were to "build" a house. If I were to do it, I would hire a contractor and pick out a few things or make a few choices. Others would do the work of the actual construction, not me personally, though after these many years with Habitat, I would probably be more involved than they would like. These partner families were different. They actually **build** their house along with teams of volunteers and staff. They know everything about their house, inside and out because of their very close relationship with it. It is then that I tell the questioner that in all our history, we have only had 3 families to leave the home they built. One family sold it back to us so that the owner could move to an Assisted Living facility due to declining health. One family sold theirs back to us because they had to move to be closer to their ailing extended family. The last one was the only foreclosure we have had in the 17 year we have been building. Everyone else is still in their home and they plan to stay there forever. They love their homes and have a special bond with that house due to the fact that they actually **built** it.

To me, this is in a small part like Jesus' comparison in the John passage you heard read. Our partner families care for their homes because they know and own them. They care for them unlike someone who hired people to build them.

In the Gospel passage, Jesus says he is the Good Shepherd and takes care of his sheep because of how much Jesus cares FOR his sheep. They are his sheep- he knows them and owns them. Unlike the hired hand who runs away when trouble comes, Jesus is there to protect and defend his sheep, even to the point of laying down his life to protect his sheep – an act that gives evidence of the intense relationship there.

When John wrote this, it was in a section of statements Jesus was making in contrast to the religious leaders and religious groups of the day. I guess they would be examples of the "bad shepherds." Jesus was giving instruction that being the shepherd of his flock was more than just a job, it was about an intimate relationship he shared with his flock and even with those not of his flock. The religious leaders of the day did not share this kind of relationship but rather were legalistic and dictatorial. We have many like that in ministry today.

It is not uncommon to hear lately of the illegal exploits of so-called ministers. It seems that daily there is a case of some pastor or church staff members who has been charged with some heinous crime. I cringe when I hear these for there are so many people in need of a community of faith but will be put off by such stories as these thinking that all ministers are alike. You and I know that not to be true.

For example – Leadership Magazine's contributing editor Richard Doebler did a study several years back in which he polled thousands of ministers. In the survey, it seems evident that in most of them beats the heart of a good shepherd. Only a little over 10% would leave the ministry for a secular pursuit that paid more money. Over 70% reported that pay was not a key factor in determining whether or not they remained in the ministry. Some 86.5% of those polled cited a strong sense of call as the reason for remaining in the ministry. When asked if given the chance to do it all over again, would they still choose ministry as a vocation given what they know now, 83 percent responded affirmatively. For these people, it is more about the relationship.

This relationship is to be what we model in our churches and faith communities. This sense of commitment, this kind of deep relationship – willingness to even die, if need be, for these with whom we share this table is not the picture of the church of which we are used to nor is it a comfortable one. These passages were given as an instruction to the local communities of faith to model something different; to follow the example of Christ and show true love. Actually, Douglas Schuurman says we are all "called of God."

"Because, like Christ, Christians are to love the world and be agents of its redemption, God's callings also relate to human needs, whether those needs are in the church or beyond it. When a Christian perceives a genuine human need and has the abilities for attending to it, that need becomes a spark of God's calling to him or her. To the extent that the duties of one's many places of responsibilities also contribute to meeting human needs, those duties are God's callings.

The purpose of God's call is for the people of God to worship God, and to participate in God's creative and redemptive purposes for the world, to enjoy, hope for, pray for, and work toward God's shalom. That is what it means for Christians to be in Christ and to follow Christ. We can step out and follow God's call because we have the confidence of Christ and the personal relationship with him; however, it is a radical...and difficult... thing to do.

This is where that "Practicing what you preach" thing comes in. The I John passage in the Today's New International Version says, "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth." The author of the Cotton Patch translation that you heard read this morning, Clarence Jordan, was one who took this very literally with his establishment of Koinonia Farm in southwest Georgia, a place of true equality at a time when that was a foreign concept in our land. You have heard Larry mention him numerous times as an example of one who put his words into actions.

Another example was the man who made the quote with which I started out with this morning, Rabbi Abraham Heschel. Heschel, born in Warsaw, was a victim of the atrocities of WWII though he personally was able to leave the country and come to the US in 1940 as a professor of Jewish theology. He lost his mother and 2 sisters to the Nazis but never blamed God. He always kept his perspective that God is with us in our struggles, not that God causes them. His experiences and his studies of scripture came to a head during the early 60's when the Civil Rights movement was getting underway. He saw what had happened when people had sat quietly as injustice had been done in his home country and he wasn't about to sit quietly in his new home. He became an outspoken leader in the movement, though somewhat different than most – a bearded white man amongst the sea of black leaders. He said that, "God is either the father of all men or of no man, and the idea of judging a person in terms of black, brown, or white is an eye disease."

When there had been some positive movement with civil rights, Heschel also included in his activities those that led opposition movements toward the war in Viet Nam. Peter Geffen of the Heschel School in New York City, wrote about Heschel that "The war in Viet Nam, for Heschel, was an ultimate act of dehumanization – to no longer even see that there was an enemy on the other side who was a human being. Heschel was convinced that if I act with a disregard for the humanity of my fellow human beings, I am ultimately attacking God." Heschel said of the war then but is hauntingly appropriate for us at this point in our history, "How can I pray when I have on my conscience that awareness that I am co-responsible for the death of innocent people in Viet Nam? In a free society, some are guilty, all are responsible." Hence, Heschel's response was to act.

We are called to action as well. How can the love of Christ be in us, if we do nothing when injustice is apparent, no matter how large or how small? And it is most times when it is small that we quietly let it pass because it probably won't matter, it is so small. Small things grow into large things that could have been prevented much easier, much earlier. How can we have the confidence of our hearts, as scripture talks about, when we hoard what we have materially, either out of fear or judgment? There are so many issues about which we need to be concerned and act, to the point that it can be overwhelming and we sometimes end up doing nothing or little more than praying about them. However, in reality, the goodness we perform or the mercy that we show is in fact our highest prayer. When Rabbi Heschel said, "It felt as if my legs were praying," he was. Naomi Levy puts it this way - "When we struggle to repair this world, when we rise above complacency and offer compassion, charity, and love, we are praying. When we fight to eradicate poverty, injustice, and war, when we take time to perform acts of kindness, we are praying. When we gather the strength to give of ourselves to those who so desperately need our assistance instead of averting our gaze, we are praying. 'I AM my prayer to you, O God,' the Psalmist cried out. When our actions embody our soul's deepest yearnings, we become a prayer."

My hope for us today is that we will rest in the confidence we possess as children of God and that our response to that deep, abiding presence of Christ will be action. I hope we will all commit ourselves to pray with our legs. Amen