



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: February 28, 2010

Jesus' Divine Imperative, Robert B. Culp

Luke 13:31-35

These brief verses from Luke are filled with deep emotion and vivid imagery. And as they come at a crucial point in Jesus' ministry, they contain a powerful clue about Jesus' character to which we would do well to attend.

In the Gospel of Matthew this lament by Jesus over Jerusalem takes place during Holy Week – after Palm Sunday and before the Last Supper – when the die is already cast, and Jesus is all but dead. But not so in Luke, where the Gospel writer describes the scene as taking place much earlier in the narrative, when Jesus is still on his way, journeying to Jerusalem. As a matter of fact, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem frames the underlying context for almost all of Luke's Gospel.

For in Luke, Jesus seems always to be on the way to Jerusalem: on the way to this holiest of cities where God is adored and worshiped in the Temple; on his way to this most sacred city where prophets are persecuted again and again for daring to speak the audacious truth, which is the truth about the cost and the gift of God's wondrous and demanding love. Nearly 90 times Luke mentions Jerusalem, which is almost twice the number as the whole rest of the New Testament combined. So, Jerusalem is very important to Luke. But it is also very important to Jesus, so much so that Jesus weeps and laments when he sees the foolishness, the impotence, the self-destructiveness and pride of Jerusalem's people.

In studying this passage, I was intrigued by the Pharisees' coming to Jesus to warn him of Herod's desire to kill him. Why did they do that? Hadn't Jesus railed against the Pharisees in some of the strongest language ascribed to him? Hadn't he called them on the carpet for their religious hypocrisy, their loveless piety, their harsh judgmental attitude that pushed away the least of these from the protective community of God? Was there something about Jesus they admired and respected after-all, something in him that made them fear for his welfare and brought forth their concern? And also, I wonder why Herod wanted Jesus dead? Why would

such a powerful ruler, a proud commander of many loyal soldiers, feel any threat coming from a lowly peasant rabbi with a rag-tag group of followers?

But most intriguing to me about this passage is the one word that seems to jump out of this account this morning, a word that appears again and again in Luke's intense narrative ... which is the word "must." Jesus must be on his way, he must go to Jerusalem, he must go to the Temple, he must go to Gethsemane, he must take up his cross and go to Calvary. Jesus' mission is not negotiable, it is not tentative, it is not changeable depending upon how he feels from day to day.

There is a passion that burns in Jesus' soul – a mission, an insistent calling, a life vocation – that defines the very heart of who he is. And nothing and nobody can dissuade him ... not the devil in the desert; not the crafty, fox-like Herod; not the curious Pharisees; not even the hurting, scared, and needy people hanging around the edges of Jerusalem – those strangers who are trying to stop Jesus in his tracks, who are begging him to save them, to fix them, to heal them.

In many respects, this tale is asking each of us a searching question today: namely, do we have a similar must in our own lives? Is there a burning passion or vision or mission in your life that propels you, energizes you, calls forth the best that is in you ... that gives you purpose and value and strength? Some of the greatest leaders in history have shared Jesus' single-minded sense of must – Martin Luther King with his dream, Franklin D. Roosevelt with his new deal, Nelson Mandela with his 30-year hope of a free South Africa, Mother Teresa with her commitment to accompany the poorest of the poor in their final journey to death's door.

Truth be told, most of us will never come anywhere near embodying such lofty and powerful ideals. But that does not let us off the hook! And indeed, that should not keep us from striving to discern and discover the meaningful musts of our own living. What is it that motivates you? For what goals are you willing to take risks? What is it that can open you to failure, that invites you to push the boundaries of your comfort zones, that may even cause you to disappoint some people along the way? I wonder ... what are the musts in our living?

* Is it the love of a child, so fierce that you can withstand fear and mistakes and struggles all along the way?

* Is it a vision for this church, a yearning for this people to grow in numbers and spirit as the church embraces new ministries for a new tomorrow?

* Is it a passion for justice that motivates you beyond the prejudice and lethargy and politics of our resistant world?

* Is it a professional ethic that demands that you stand up to the status quo, that calls you to risk money and advancement and security in order to do what is right, in order to keep your integrity intact, in order to preserve your health and sanity?

In this brief account from Luke, Jesus models for us, and indeed mandates for us, a sense

of must. What is it that your life is worth living for? What is it in your life that you simply must do?

Interestingly, Luke suggests that Jesus pauses for just a moment in the midst of his mission and his compelling sense of must. He pauses ... and, as it were, spreads the wings of his imagination with an image of pathos and love. Glancing from the Mount of Olives across the Kidron Valley looking toward Jerusalem, Jesus laments, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the broken 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!”

“... and you were not willing!” Jesus’ words are haunting, aren’t they?

It is as if he is saying between the lines ...

“And because in my love I cannot force you to come with me, and because you are unwilling to receive my counsel and move toward the life I offer you, and because you are not willing to come and accept the protection and warmth and promise of God’s nurturing love, I must go on. I must leave you where you wish to remain, out in the cold and dark. I must go on.

You will not see me again until it is too late – until the palm branches have all been swept up, until the bread has been broken and the cup of wine shared, until the nails have been hammered and my broken body has been laid to rest. Maybe then, after I have gone through all my pain and you have gone through yours, maybe then you will come to me and gather under me and with me around the table of God’s kingdom ... God’s healed and reconciled and empowered kingdom.”

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem.” The city that refused the comfort of the mother hen and was seduced by fear. Jesus expresses his deep longing to gather the people of Jerusalem into his presence, just as a mother hen gathers her chicks into a brood. In the absence of a faith-filled leader, though, they have fallen victim to the cunning of the fox. The mother hen emphatically clucks, calling her chicks into the safety of her nest ... but they do not recognize her voice. They have forgotten who they are. Her wings are open, breast exposed, ready to embrace them. But they have fallen prey to the contagious fear spread by the fox. Indeed, they are caught up in the chaos of fear, rather than embraced by the hen’s nest of compassion.

In the shadow of the nuclear threat of the 1980’s, Henri Nouwen wrote that “We are a fearful people. It often seems that fear has invaded every part of our beings to such a degree that we no longer know what a life without fear would feel like. Often fear has penetrated our inner selves so deeply that it controls, whether we are aware of it or not, most of our choices and decisions. In many ways, often very subtle ways,” Nouwen noted, “fear victimizes and controls us ... and we live in a house of fear most of the time.”

Almost 30 years later, things haven’t changed that much, have they? The sources of our

fear have changed, but the perceived threats have intensified ... whether it involves the threat of terrorist attacks, the threat of economic ruin, the threat of legislative paralysis because of partisan bickering, or the specter of increased regulations or security measures that often intensify our fear.

In contrast to this house of fear, Jesus invites us into the house of love. Jesus reminds us that love is stronger than fear, though the opposite may seem to be true. Fear makes us run away from each other or cling to each other, but fear does not create intimacy. Fear conjures either too much distance or too much closeness, and in either case prevents the formation of a healthy community in which we can grow together, each in our own way. While the fox engenders fear, the mother hen fosters love. She invites her brood into her nest where they find true security and love. And Jesus desperately yearns for the chicks to gather around under the safety of his wings, and be welcomed into the house of love, perfect love, where they ... where you and I ... need no longer ever be afraid.

Those who accept the invitation to the home of such divine love encounter others on the journey. We discover that we are not alone and that others share our pain, our suffering, our joys, our triumphs. Solidarity and community is formed as we reside together and minister together in the house of love where fear has been conquered and chased away.

Imagine what our world might be like if all fear – from personal insecurities to global dangers – could be transformed into love. All the negative energy we expend in protecting ourselves from perceived threats and enemies could be channeled into creating a house of divine love. Such a home of love would be characterized by understanding, listening, and respect, with our energies being used in cooperation instead of competition. We would not be looking out for ourselves, but for all people.

Martin Luther King, Jr. offered an image of such a “world house.” He wrote, “We have inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, interest, who, because we can never live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace. The large house in which we live, however, demands that we transform this worldwide neighborhood into a worldwide brotherhood. Together we must learn how to live as brothers (and sisters), or together we will be forced to perish as fools.” The choice in this “world house” is either chaos or community.

Jesus laments the overwhelming power of fear that lures people into destructive actions. As you well know, he himself was the victim of others’ fears. Yet he longs to gather everyone into the nest of love where community can be found, where a just future can be forged, where we learn afresh the important musts for our lives, and where we are equipped and empowered to return to the world to conquer fear with love. Indeed, it is here in this wondrous community

of faith where we find security and purpose, sheltered beneath the wings of a mother hen ... our loving Lord ... who must be on his way to Jerusalem, and who invites you and me to follow along and share his life-giving journey.

Let us pray: O Lord, unfetter us from the chains of fear and set us free to follow you, as we joyfully and willingly embrace the musts of your love which lead to life in abundance; in Jesus' name. Amen.