

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church & Neighborhood House
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No Obstacles (Sermon Notes)
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If I were a fire and brimstone preacher these passages would rank right up there at the top of my list. Both readings exhale exhortation. In Luke, the frustration of Jesus and in Hebrews, the writer, Paul – maybe or maybe not – challenging early Christians to stay the course, regardless of the temporal conditions.

I'll start with Luke, listening especially for Jesus' frustration, almost anxiety in the difficulty he is having at getting his message across. Jesus' words remind me of his actions on the day he overturned the tables in the temple.

The prophetic tirade that follows must have been especially aggravating since it was likely directed to those close to him, rather than a distant group of "moneychangers" - strangers, in the dusty poorly lit back of the temples.

These were likely people, many of whom we know by names, men and women who had been with him, probably finishing another one of their annoying arguments about who would be first when this new conquering kingdom of theirs is achieved; who among them was the most faithful (read favorite of Jesus); or even the criticism: Why has he not brought down fire and punishment upon these oppressors of the times, establishing himself once and for all?

I can see Jesus hearing this at the end of a long day. Maybe Jesus was a bit tired, frustrated, looking for some little sign that he was getting through; for so long now he had been at it, telling stories, explaining things, carefully and patiently; trying to help them understand that the kingdom of which he spoke was greater than all the lands and the riches in it, greater than the endless waters and oceans of the seas, more vast than all the skies, more brilliant than all the stars combined, more powerful than all the armies and nature combined - and still they bickered about possessions and territories and rights and privileges and power and glory and getting control of those who oppressed *them* so they could love them or return the favor? You decide.

It's easy to imagine a day like that happening more than once in the years they were all together. After all, how could they know what Jesus knew? How could we know, today? I imagine we would frustrate Jesus, from time to time, as well.

In our own ways many of us, too, have sought the cash and prizes, or have felt marginalized and hurt, and have temporarily abandoned the higher order for the short-term response seeking to get power, to avenge or to get even.

"I'll show them!"

"They'll pay for that remark."

Or just sometimes carefully wound up in one word responses: "Really..." with just the right inflection.

Well, on this day, Jesus spoke out with more than one inflected word. He let it rip:

[What do you think I came here for? For you? For your earthly kingdom?!] "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! [And you're worried about pecking order?!] Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! [Division from the weights and anchors that tie your spirits and hearts to the ground, stopping you from reaching your fulfillment. It's gotten so bad and so ingrained in you and this human race that there is going to be real anguish ahead.] From now on five in one household will be divided: three against two and two against three. [Some will be ready for the change and some will fight it tooth and nail.] [There will be] father against son, mother against daughter, daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother in law."

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens.

You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but do you not know how to interpret the present time?" [Of course you do, you just choose not to see it or what needs to be done. You've gotten too comfortable and complacent, and I promise you I will change that!]

Let it rip, indeed.

Did you hear his remarks about baptism?

"I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!"

This is a baptism that collides with the very universe rushing into the boundaries that surround it and beyond the cosmos or anything we understand about and right to God, Abba.

Just in terms of dynamics, this baptism drives right through everything between humankind and God. There are collisions here. Collisions that will produce violent responses. Crossing over the boundaries of marginalization and the avarice fortified walls of such territories – his message of justice, hospitality and Love of and for God – done in the humblest of ways – will threaten the foundations of First Century powerbrokers and produce responses egregiously flawed and equally as violent.

That's how bad it had gotten. Some say that's how bad it is today.

To me it foreshadows the cross. Jesus in this cosmic struggle, standing upright on the earth with the vision and direction toward God, on a direct collision course between ways of the earthly kingdom and the kingdom of God. The crucifixion; the intersection of one man of God bridging earth and eternity with the ultimate sacrifice.

From Hebrews:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

Jesus knew what he knew, but why couldn't others get it? Why they were unable to see the vision? Why did they lack the faith to make up the difference?

Perhaps we are lucky they were able to get what they did, so we could learn of it. Still, I wonder how much more Jesus had to teach them. Did he need to stop short? Accept their inability to envision the power of their relationship to God as having no obstacles, other than of their own making? Falling short of vision, faith, love, courage, and the joy of sacrifice in the pursuit of such things as Jesus knew?

He must have been frustrated at times.

Still. Jesus did not waver. He completed the course, and as far as I can tell, he is still the only one with the vision that we are still trying to get, which is why in this Christian tradition and for others who find comfort in him that we need him still.

It is the lack of knowing his vision or faith in his vision that too often lead a church like ours to our own shortcomings, our timidity and intimidation by the response of reactions of others to what it is the vision calls us to do.

We become our own obstacles and are as blind to our complicity in the crucifixion of others as were some in the time of Jesus. Without the spiritual heft and courage of Jesus, we begin to misplace our foundations, creating the real possibility of simply collapsing under our own weight of irrelevance and impotence.

Where is the courage and wisdom and vision as a people and a local and world community.

- Is it to go to war as a national or foreign policy in dealing with rogue groups, nations, or ideologies?

- Is it in subordinating ourselves to the comfortability of others in accepting all members of God's family to our family?
- Is it in the acquiescence to a well-crafted and controlled legacy of Jesus and God that keeps us earthbound and dominated rather than soaring in our baptisms.

[Could you ever imagine Jesus being “controlled” by such as this?!]

Hardly, Jesus challenged those with limited vision and suspect motives, and calls them out. Remember "brood of vipers"? Jesus challenged all to grasp the vision, what they could and could not see of it, making up the difference in faith, hospitality, the Greatest of Commandments, and the Schema.

Yes, it is Love. But it's the God=Love, kind of love. It's the origin of and more than the agape, filios, and eros. It's the love of baptism to the finish line.

It seems we still have a ways to go:

- Right now, we live in the shadows of two wars as our own chosen response to others
- we place restrictions on people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
- We live in a society still sickened with the sleazy, slimy, smarmy and sickening practice of racism
- We far too often still marginalize "the other" among us: the invisible people who are unsheltered, unfed, unclothed, unseen...
- we accept economic practices that exaggerate the inequity and suffering of others, and then look the other way, blaming the victim instead of accepting responsibility
- we practice remediation through the incarceration of nearly one full percent of our adult population (2,300,000+ people). Our incarceration rates are the highest in the world, with “751 people in prison or jail for every 100,000 in population. Russia is second with 627 people per 100,000 in population. The median among all nations is 125 – 1/6th of the USA¹
- We seem to accept by deflection, distraction, and denial the inevitability of an eco apocalypse, despite all the warning.
- And we are preoccupied as a human society with: if we will get there, wherever there is, and when we do – will we be first, with more, better positioned...

It sounds remarkably like what we might have imagined Rome to be in the time of Jesus. It sounds like it has all taken too long.

It sounds like we still need Jesus, his vision, and his presence. We need to listen and hear his voice in our heart and through the voices and hearts of others. And we need to act and really carefully consider whether those - humans or institutions that beckon us in ways that we know seem wrong or misguided - we really need to consider what responses are the most faithful.

¹ NYT, April 23, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/23/world/americas/23iht-23prison.12253738.html>

On Saturday, I will be traveling to the West Coast to witness and be present at worship services at the church trial of The Rev. Dr. Janie Spahr, a minister of 34 years, facing discipline for legally marrying same gender couples in the Bay Area. She is being charged among other things, with violating her ordination vows for doing so.

For Janie, me, and others like us – to not marry loving couples of the same gender is a violation of our ordination vows, but even more – a violation of our covenant with God in baptism. We will continue to legally marry same gender couples, not motivated by defiance of the ambiguity of church law, but as being faithful to our ordination vows which call us to minister and be provide pastoral care to all those who come to us to make such a covenant.

From there, come what may...

And so should it be in our lives with all injustice. We can't wait for the dominant society to tell us it's right to address marginalization when clearly it is wrong now. And, we can't expect to always be well-received by those we are inviting to change and embrace a fuller vision of God's kindom on Earth on its way to God.

Or, in a variation of something Drucilla Cornell of Rutger's University has said:

We cannot be excused from our own role
in history because we could not know so
as to be sure that we were 'right' [in the eyes of others] in advance.

The incubation for visions of justice is love - God - that foments through the voice and courage and actions of those seeking its wider distribution. It is only possible in community that blends with other communities in reaching out, rather than re-establishing boundaries and replicating the injustice, once again.

We are a community here of reformers, in the tradition, we hope, of the Czech reformer after whom the church is named. You and those you bring here are the community that we seek to build and grow as an influence and voice against injustice – but more – in the vision of Jesus and on a path from which the obstacles between God's people and God have been removed.

We'll never get there. It's an ideal. It's heaven. But in the meantime, we don't need to roll over and wait, *il dolce fa niente* (the sweet to do nothing). We can make a difference now. So, join us, join with us, bring your causes and injustices here and remember these words of our sung blessing state:

Christians rise and act your creed,
Let your prayer be in your deed;
Seek the right, perform the true
Raise your work and life anew.
Come then law divine and reign,

Freest faith assailed in vain.
Perfect love, bereft of fear,
Born in heaven and radiant here.

Amen.