

St. Andrew's UMC
May 3rd, 2009
John 10:11-18
"The Good Shepherd Lays Down His Life"

I remember one Korean pastor whom I met about 20 years ago. A Korean American church invited him to come to speak on a church-related subject which I do not recall. He was respected as one of the few "successful" ministers, for he was able to buy an elementary school and converted into a church. Then you become some sort of a celebrity in the denomination.

I forgot just about everything he said, except three things. One was this: "When the time comes, one has to go." He meant that when the time for us to die comes, we have to. The other was about how he would like to die: when the time comes, he said, it would be an honor for him to drop dead right at the pulpit, while he preached.

That statement perked up my ears, not because I was impressed by his willingness to give up his life to the ministry, but because of the audacity that he was looking for what amounted to a mild form of a martyrdom. It perked up my ears, because just a

moment ago, he said the third thing I remember.

While he did his ministry back in Korea, the political situation was volatile. The people demonstrated against the military regimes, and many students and citizens were killed and maimed by the government thugs, the police, and the military. Many Catholic priests were thrown into jail for saying what may be termed as anti-government rhetoric. Very few Protestant ministers found themselves in jail, however, for the obvious reason which I will share next.

The pastor volunteered to reveal how he avoided the jail: he kept his mouth shut, and preached only the gospel. He added that he had a wife and kids to feed. Further he said, he did not want to be beaten and jailed. He challenged the audience, which one of them was willing to be beaten up and jailed? No one said anything back to him, and the pastor confidently surveyed the audience with the "I-dare-you" look in his face.

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At the time, I felt huge contempt surging up from my gut. He labeled as “preaching the gospel” what was obviously an easy copout from exercising the ethical and moral obligation, by keeping his mouth shut. He did not want to invite troubles by speaking out against injustice and corruption that ruled the land. How do we proclaim that our God is God of justice and righteousness, while keeping our mouths shut about the injustice and violence in front of our eyes?

On top of that, he now sought a pain-free martyrdom, replete with honor, after having lived his natural life—now he lives safely in the land of freedom and democracy. He implied that keeping his mouth shut and staying away from the subject of the corrupt, unjust, and murderous military regime was the act of remaining authentic to the gospel.

Looking back, I realize that I am no longer so idealistic, and the radical edge has dulled somewhat.

And I have to admit: I do not feel so contemptuous of the man any more—because I realize that have a lot to lose, just as he did at the time.

I doubt very much, however, that I would have been so proud of having kept the mouth shut before the unjust power, while my fellow countrymen were being beaten and jailed, or even dying, for having spoken out against. He was proud enough to challenge the complete strangers in the audience, whether they would have done anything differently, if they were in his shoes.

After all these years, I still have a great difficulty with what the man said. According to the pastor, the gospel's integrity can remain intact, while ignoring the cry of the people suffering under the oppressive military regime. Somehow, criticizing the government and its practice of injustice, corruption, and violence from the pulpit adulterated the gospel. In order for the gospel of Jesus Christ to

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remain pure, it had to be free of any negative political references. He was proud of having preached the "pure" gospel and maintained the integrity of the pulpit. That reminded me of what Jesus had said one day in the synagogue:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk. 4)."

If the good news of the gospel fails to speak for the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed, I do not know what "good" in the "good news" could ever mean.

There are inherent risks involved with professions. People take up such professions, fully knowing the risks involved. Farmers accept the risk of a bad harvest. Insurance companies assume the risk of actual loss of property. Firefighters run into burning buildings, because there is something valuable to save. But

what happens, if everyone begins to refuse to accept the risks inherent to their profession? What happens, if preachers refuse to name the evil, because they are afraid of risking jail time?

What if farmers quit farming, because of the uncertainty of the harvest? What if the insurance companies refuse to cover the loss, because they do not want to lose the money? What if the firefighters refuse to enter the burning building? What if the police refused to patrol the crime areas, the military refused to be deployed in the war zone, because it was too dangerous? What if the soldiers in World War II decided that, since storming the beach of Normandy was just too dangerous, they just stayed in the barracks?

If people are not able or willing to accept the risks, then maybe they should not stay in the profession, and step aside. Maybe they should consider other lines of work that do not pose any risk.

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There was a Florida man who actually jumped off his boat and punched the shark in the nose, in order to save his pooch. Would you commend his valor, and selfless love and dedication to his pet? What would you have said to the Florida man, if he jumped in front of a rushing semi-trailer to save, not the dog, but his dear, prized piglet?

If the man risked his life to save a dog, he might win praises, but if he risked his life for a farm animal, would he earn despises? People might understand risking one's welfare to save a dog's life. After all, some dogs are like a family member. What about risking one's life, no, giving up one's life for farm animals? What sense does that make?

And that is exactly what Jesus said: the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. A human life for livestock! How many of the animal lovers would lay down their lives for the life of their pets? How many good

farmers would lay down their lives for the cattle? It just does not make much sense.

Well, actually, Jesus was speaking in metaphor. Jesus compared his followers to the flock of sheep, and he declared that he would lay down his life for the welfare of his followers. Okay, now that makes sense, because it is a human life for many human lives. We can accept that as a heroic act.

Who knew, the job of the messiah carried the risk of dying? What would have happened, if Jesus shut his mouth up, like the minister I met 20 years ago, when the authorities challenged him by what authority he taught these things, and threw him in jail and whipped him? What if preachers switched to preaching so-called "pure" gospel, when the government thugs roughed them up? If spending time in Birmingham jail convinced Martin Luther King Jr. where blacks should belong, and to keep his mouth

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shut, where would today's America be?

There are some things that are worth risking our welfare and lives for. If Christians are averse to taking that risk, then others who have committed themselves to their own principles would take the risk, and win their cause. They could well turn out to be the very people with whom we could not disagree more.

For the general population, the ultimate concern is roughly divided into three areas: self, others, and afterlife (or the religious faith). For most of people, it is probably the first part for which they will lay down their lives: for self. For Jesus, it was the second part for which he laid down his life: for others. For the remaining few, it would be the afterlife, or the religious faith, for which they will lay down their lives.

When some one lays down his or her life for second or third categories, we call that person a martyr. You do not get to become a martyr, or to have the

honor of dying at the pulpit, while preaching the "pure" gospel that offends no one in the power, while keeping your mouth shut to save your hide.

When you live and die for your self, you do not need a religion to do that. Any one can do it, and the human history has been full of people who were willing to die for the self-serving causes. Jesus came, in order to end that cycle of violence and injustice that selfish struggles perpetuated for many millennia.

Ultimately, the Christian religion is concerned with human relations: our relationship with other human beings defines our relationship with God. For Jesus, his religion was radically concerned with the welfare of others. His religion was fundamentally a self-less one.

For most people, the gospel is not much more than the "inordinately self-referential and narcissistic interpretations that merely confirm lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviors (Five

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Practices of Fruitful Congregations, p.66).” Our pastor in question interpreted the gospel, so that he could maintain his own lifestyle, attitude, and behavior, while others sacrificed theirs. In short, in order to maintain his status quo, he chose to ignore what was happening right outside his church doors.

What good is the good news for the oppressed, if the preacher does not want to risk offending the oppressors? What good is the gospel, if it requires one to keep his or her mouth shut, and care only for one's own self? What good is a religion that is insensitive to justice and righteousness?

A religion used to be a risky thing to advocate. Preaching the gospel was a risky thing for Jesus. Actually, it proved mortally dangerous to his health. Would Jesus have been better off, if he had chosen not to offend any one with his gospel? If that was what Jesus had done, then there would have been no church, no Easter,

and we would be elsewhere right now.

If all the risk and offense was removed from the gospel, then the gospel rubs no one the wrong way, and it becomes a comfortable sofa. In that comfortable sofa, the only thing one needs to lay down is one's own posterior: the Christianity becomes a religion that comforts the comfortable, but requires no sacrifice.

Jesus may not ask us to lay down our lives for every cause that we see today. But Jesus would ask: do you have one single cause for which you will lay down your life? If we have one, that cause would be the cause well worth living for. To die for is to live for. A life with a cause to die for is a life truly worthy to live.

It is my hope today that each and every one of us would find that life, and live it to the abundant fullest. But that abundance of life does include a sacrifice, and is a risky one. May God bless you and guide you, as you strive

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to discover, and to live for, that
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