

Sermon 4-28-19
Paul Purdue preaching

Easter Engages Our Boldness

Easter sends us out with a benediction to live as Jesus lived: “as the Creator sent me, so I send you.” (John 20) In our passage from Acts 5, Luke recounts actions from the earliest days of the church. The apostles on trial is a story of holy boldness. Just as Jesus lived with a disruptive and holy boldness, Jesus sends us to live boldly.

Let us pray. Creator God, you made us in your image and number the hairs on our head and read our every tweet. We come to dwell in You. Free us from all that hinders our living as children of God. Sweep away the fears that tempt us to settle for mediocrity. Liberate us from hypocrisy and self-deception. Come, love of God, and hold us until any hatred melts. Give us new scales to measure our lives. Let us find our significance in the way we care for others. Help us see your image in everyone. Fill us with holy boldness. Amen.

Perhaps it was an Easter gift or maybe an accident, but someone propped a brand new, never read, unascribed book against my office door: Jesus and the Disinherited by Howard Thurman. Assuming it was for me, I took it home. On Easter Monday (a church staff holiday), I read 4/5th of the book. Now, if it was your book, and you lent it to me without a note, just know I have personalized page 19 with approximately 76 words describing Thurman’s three hounds of hell... and blue pencil marks are now everywhere. Easter Tuesday, having already planned to preach on the lectionary text and holy boldness, I woke up with a deep impression that Jesus and the Disinherited should drive this Confirmation sermon. On Thursday, I had doubts about how interested you confirmards might be in a book first published in 1949. But remembering myself standing on the edge of high school, perhaps you also worry about Thurman’s three hounds of hell: fear, hypocrisy, and hatred.

Howard Thurman’s grandmother was a slave, who, until the Civil War, lived on a plantation near Madison, Florida. Thurman writes, “my regular chore was to do all of the reading for my grandmother. She could neither read nor write. Two or three times a week I read the Bible aloud to her. I was deeply impressed by the fact that she was most particular about the choice of scripture. For instance, I might read many Psalms, from Isaiah and the Gospels again and again. But Paul’s letters, never- except the 13th chapter of First Corinthians.. My curiosity knew no bounds, but we did not question her about anything.”

When I was halfway through college, I spent a few days at home. With a feeling of great temerity, I asked her one day why she would not let me read any of Paul’s letters. What she told me I shall never forget: “During the days of slavery”, she said, “the master’s minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old Man McGee was so mean he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used a text, ‘slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters... as unto Christ’. Then he would go on to show how it was

God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read, if freedom ever came, I would not read from that part of the Bible."

Since that fateful day on the front porch in Florida I have been working on the problem her words presented: "How to be a Christian when Christianity has perpetrated so much harm to so many people we dearly love?"

Thurman's answer comes on page 19 and unfolds across the book, "In Christ's is life and the life is the light of humanity.' Wherever Jesus' spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage, for Jesus announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, those three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them."

In Acts 5, the apostles on trial tells of regular folks boldly defeating the three hounds of hell - fear, hypocrisy and hatred - by living with identity, authenticity and love. The way is what the house of Israel first called Christians. We began as a reform movement, meeting in synagogues and the temple courts. Jesus belonged to and loved the household of Israel, but Jesus' truth-telling made enemies of the power-brokers and religious experts who "regarded Jesus as a careless perverter of the truths of God." (Thurman 80)

The way embraced Jesus' Easter benediction to do the things that Jesus did. The early church offered free healthcare. "Large numbers of persons from towns around Jerusalem would gather, bringing the sick and those harassed by unclean spirits. Everyone was healed."

Luke reports how the high priest and his political cronies were overcome with jealousy. They arrested the apostles under false pretenses making "a public show". But after midnight, an angel (or messenger) from the Lord opened the prison doors and led them out. An angel leads a holy jailbreak. Pause a moment and consider that. It is bold. That is ecclesiastical disobedience - illegal. I might have told the angel, "With all due respect, I do not want to break the law, I mean...let's just sit here in jail and see what happens with our church trial." Would you break out of jail or stay with your chains? The apostles listen to the angel, "Go, take your place in the temple, and tell the people everything about this new life."

Somewhere deep in our souls, God is always asking us, "Today, will you come to take your place in the temple?" But, fear of taking our place nips at our hope like a rabid dog from hell. It howls its disapproval and tries to lock us down, keep us chained to lesser things. Fear seeks to track us down, to sink its teeth into our leg and drag us away from the place God calls us to be. Maybe you have been afraid to speak up for a classmate, reach out to try something new, tell someone to stop, share your deepest thoughts.

Thurman offers an antidote for fear: take your deepest identity as a child of God. Fear tempts us to live a lie - to live as something less than a child of God. Fear's sister hound is deception, and deception tempts us to be someone less than a child of God. Thurman writes, "A person's conviction that they are God's child automatically shifts our relationships with everyone." When we know that God counts the freckles on our cheek and hairs on our head, and that God created that sense of who we find attractive, we come to know that our deepest

selves are personalized gifts of God. "Once we know our belovedness, we recognize that to fear another person, whatever power they hold over us is a basic denial of the integrity of our very own life. One who fears is literally delivered to destruction. But the child of God gets a new scale of values." These Christ-shaped scales measure life differently; they measure "true significance" by the way we treat others. As a child of God, we realize the climax of human history comes in Matthew 25, where the inner significance of each of our deeds is revealed to us. We see how our lives impacted all of God's other children. We fear God alone (Matthew 10)... people, tweets, and threats, not so much.

Knowing the light of Jesus, these apostles took their place in the temple. After the jailbreak, they did not run away but engaged their opponents. Early in the morning, they "took their place" in the temple and began to teach. Having seen the cross and the risen Lord, they knew it was better to die at the hands of the powerful than to live never speaking the truth. Easter animates us in holy boldness. The very breath of Jesus brings boldness.

Luke cuts the scene from the temple to church courtroom saying, "meanwhile, the high priest and his cronies convey a church trial. They send word to the bailiff to drag the apostates from the prison, but "where are they? Everything is locked up and well-secured, guards at the doors all night. Everyone is baffled!" Just then, the Bishop's bailiff runs in yelling, "Look! Those people you locked up are at it again... teaching in temple!" They send the religious police. The captain refuses to use force because they feared the regular Jewish worshippers might stone the police to death. Perhaps they had a police oversight board in Jerusalem?

So the president of the council of bishops confronts Peter, and I hope Magdalene, "In no uncertain terms, we demanded that you not teach in Jesus' name. And look at you! You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching. And you are determined to hold us responsible for this man's death." There will always be people, powerful people, telling you to be something other than a child of God. Some will say Jesus is antiquated. Others will say Jesus is a Republican and others a democrat. Some will say Jesus is an oppressor. Some will tell you your identity is tied up in human sexuality, musical ability, grades, attractiveness, the college you get into, the car you drive, or the work you do. These deceptions are hypocrisies - less than the image God imprinted into your soul. I am deceiving myself if I define myself as the fifth chair tuba player, Belmont's pastor, a Tennessean, or hetreosexual white male. No, God made me and my folks named me Paul Robert Purdue, and Jesus measures my life by how I treat people. "The penalty of deception is you become a deception." (55) Deception hounds us and keeps us from taking our place in God's temple. "You are God's work," Thurman thunders, "don't fear human scorn."

As we rejoin the apostles on trial in progress, be mindful that narrow literalism always causes harm. Christian's have read Acts and used it to persecute our Jewish cousins. Gentle reader, it was the religious powers, not the household of Israel who crucified Jesus. Indeed, a member of the council will argue for and win the apostle's release.

Now we rejoin the story as a bishop thunders, "In no uncertain terms, we demanded that you not teach in Jesus' name. And look at you! You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching. And you are determined to hold us responsible for this man's death."

What do we do when someone pushes down our voice, when they seek to silence the song our Creator wove into the very fabric of our being? Well, that can make you mad as hell. It can summon the most powerful hound of hell: hatred.

Thurman says the church doesn't like to talk about hate. When we do, it is soft, simple and sentimental. But hate holds a deep power. Hate fuels wars. Hate drives people to power with clenched teeth and fixed-eyed resolve, "I will show them." The problem with hate is it is a nuclear fuel. Once released, it cannot be contained. Once lit, it consumes us. Hate destroys the soul of the one who hates. (75)

Love is the antidote to hate. We resist evil, injustice, and oppression with love. Love is not a syrupy "that's okay... I didn't mind that you did that." No! Love is strong - a truth teller. It might even promise it's maker "I am not reading that part of the Bible." It is not fearful or deceptive, for it measures significance with holy scales, fearing God alone. Love is not sentimental but ethical. Love is not emotional but just. Love knows that allowing another person to trample anyone's song is not right, so it takes its rightful place within God's temple. So when the powerful shout, "In no uncertain terms, we demanded that you not speak in Jesus' name. And look at you!" Love answers, "We must obey God rather than humans!" That is bold.

So let us be bold enough to live lives free from the hounds of hell: fear, hypocrisy and hatred. Let us be bold enough to live lives of love. Let us be bold enough to live authentically as a child of God. Let us be bold enough to live justly treating all people as children of God, so that when we reach the climax of our human history and we lock eyes with our Creator, we see in ourselves courage, authenticity, and love. Amen.