

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Jesus' metaphor for faith is challenging, even daring. To follow Jesus we are invited to die to ourselves, in order to bear fruit for the reign of God. Jesus says, 'Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.'

Have you taken a long hard look recently at where Jesus went during his lifetime? Have you read through the gospels recently and tracked all the different places and people Jesus encountered?

Our text today says that some Greeks were trying to see Jesus. We don't have explicit information that says they actually did, but we do know that their request caused Jesus to state once again his sense of call, his sense of purpose. Jesus declared, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Jesus knows that his ministry is nearing its completion, for he has already entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, even though we don't celebrate Palm Sunday until next week. Jesus knew that the disciples would have to carry the message of the kingdom of God into the future, to bear witness to his presence among us. So, Jesus reiterates the daring faith to which his followers are called.

So today, I would like to reflect on what was so daring about Jesus while he was among us? Where did Jesus go? Who did Jesus hang out with? What made his life so daring?

Well, Jesus hung out with people that most people wouldn't intentionally encounter - the prostitutes, the adulterers, the religiously unclean. Rachelle Starr does, too. She started an organization called Scarlet Hope, a ministry that reaches out to women involved in the sex industry. She and members of her organization spend countless hours in strip clubs, fixing hair and make-up so they can have some one-on-one time with the women, hoping for an opportunity to see hearts change as the women reclaim their belovedness in God.

Jesus hung out with those struggling with debilitating illnesses and disabilities - the leper, the paralyzed, the blind, the infirmed - like the Twietmeyers from Chicago who adopted two sets of three siblings from Ethiopia with HIV/AIDS. Carolyn Twietmeyer, the mom of now 13 children says, "As Christians, we kind of struck gold [with adoption] in that it is literally touching the heart of God and living out the Gospel we believe in." Twietmeyer is the founder of Project HOPEFUL, a group of mothers that seeks to bring awareness to and advocate for adopting children living with HIV. "Once you bring one [child] home and you experience that depth of relationship and closeness with someone you didn't give birth [to] then you realize the love of God is stronger than that," she said. "It just ties in our whole faith on a level that I don't think anything else has."

Jesus challenged the systems and structures that oppressed the outcasts of 1st century Palestinian society - healing on the Sabbath, tossing the tables in the temple - like Noelle Damico who works with the Coalition of Immokalee farm workers. In Florida the Coalition continues ensure that the tomatoes picked produce a living wage for farm workers and their families. The work of the Coalition saves children from hunger. It improves the lives of those who are essential to our lives - if we like tomatoes - because only humans can pick tomatoes.

"Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there will my servant be also." Jesus dared to go against social conventions, religious traditions and political power games to touch people's lives with God's healing and saving grace. And doing so, as we know, got him killed.

Yet, what I find incredibly encouraging about this passage for our own lives is Jesus' frankness about how difficult this was even for him. Jesus admits in our passage that his soul was troubled. It is as if Jesus is confessing to us that he is losing sleep given what God is calling him to do as well as where God is calling him to go. Jesus even

wonders if he should ask God to change the plans, to make it easier for him.

Rachelle's soul was troubled too. She was raised in a Christian home and certainly had never been in a strip club. But, something undeniable within her called her to reach out to women in the sex industry. She didn't know how she was going to do it and it made her nervous even voicing her sense of call to others. But, she finally did and God opened doors for the ministry she began. Her heart and relationship with Jesus changed dramatically as she witnessed Jesus show up time and time again in the back of a strip club dressing room.

My own heart was troubled when I was first asked by Steve LaFond to be a volunteer police chaplain for the City of Garden Grove. I couldn't imagine hanging out with police officers and riding in a police car given my aversion to guns. I honestly didn't want to do it, but I felt God's unmistakable calling to serve in the community of the church I was serving. As I have reflected on my thirteen years as a volunteer Chaplain, I know that Jesus showed up every time I rode with an officer or responded to a call where tragedy had struck. Even though that calling often troubled my heart - like the toddlers who drowned, or the father of six, who died of a massive heart attack on the morning the family was to go to Disneyland for the first time, after traveling across the country from Illinois. Each and every time I was called out by a dispatcher, I trusted that God's healing and saving grace would accompany me and God was ever faithful.

Jesus trusted in God's healing and saving grace as well, for he said, "No," to taking this hour from him. Jesus did not give up because his heart was troubled. He did not give up because the way forward would be hard. He did not give up even though he knew it would cost him his life.

Adoniram Judson loved Anne, but he felt called to leave America and sail for Burma in 1813. Burma at the time didn't have a single missionary and was an extremely hostile environment. Adoniram wrote Ann's father the following letter asking for her hand in marriage:

"I have now to ask, whether you can consent to part with your daughter early next spring, to see her no more in this world; whether you can consent to her departure, and her subjection to the hardships and sufferings of missionary life; whether you can consent to her exposure to the dangers of the ocean, to the fatal influence of the southern climate of India; to every kind of want and distress; to degradation, insult, persecution, and perhaps a violent death. Can you consent to all this, for the sake of him who left his heavenly home, and died for her and for you; for the sake of perishing, immortal souls; for the sake of Zion, and the glory of God? Can you consent to all this, in hope of soon meeting your daughter in the world of glory, with the crown of righteousness?"

For those of you who have daughters or granddaughters, how would you respond? For those with sons or grandsons, how would you respond to Adoniram's wanting to accept his hour, the call God had placed on his heart? Ann's father told Adoniram that it was her decision to make and she wrote to her friend saying, "I feel willing...to give up all my comforts and enjoyments here...to go where God sees fit to place me."

I believe this is what Jesus meant when he said to his disciples, "No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Jesus lived for God's glory. Jesus lived among us to show us how to be most fully human by daring to love with every fiber of our being the other. Jesus lived among us to teach us another way of living together, with compassion and love, justice and mercy.

Scholars suggest that Jesus declaration, "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out," speaks against the human principalities and powers that teach us that domination and violence are the only way to peace. Speaks against the cultural belief that a life of luxury and comfort is our highest calling. Reminds us that God's ways, not our ways, make life more meaningful. The systemic powers so prevalent in our culture and influential in our lives are overthrown as Christ is lifted up in our lives. Jesus lived

among us to show us an alternative way of being fully human. An alternative way of self-giving - dying to oneself in order to live - that brings healing and hope to humanity.

And in Jesus' self-giving I hear the echo of God's words to the people of Israel through the prophet Jeremiah, "I will make a new covenant with you. I will put my law within you and I will write it on your hearts, I will be your God, and you shall be my people. I will forgive your iniquity and remember your sin no more." Our hearts already know this truth, for we were crafted in the image of God. We only need to rediscover the truth that God has already written on our hearts.

Jeremiah and Jesus give us a glimpse of the fruits of our faith as we dare to follow God, even though our hearts may be troubled given the reality of our world.

Following Jesus compels us to enter into real places and in relationship with real people - into a strip club to be in relationship with working women, into the Ethiopian Aids crisis to be in relationship with orphaned children with aids, into the Florida fields of tomatoes to be in relationship with farmworkers struggling to feed their families, to the shores of a country not your own to carry the gospel message.

Every time I sat in a police cruiser, I knew that God would open my eyes to a reality that I would rather not know. It was far more comfortable to believe that all was well in the City of Garden Grove then to be exposed to prostitutes who saw no other way to provide for themselves or their families, or to see the reality of what takes place in adult book stores or to experience the effects of gangs and drugs on families or to feel the pain of a family whose son or daughter, husband or wife just tragically lost their lives.

It is far more comfortable to live our faith without going into the places where Jesus went. Yet, you and I are called to go where Jesus went to encounter real places and real people. The faith we claim is a daring faith, because we are called to give of ourselves even if it troubles us and costs us... our comfort, our reputation or our life.

On this Lenten Sunday, I don't know what God is daring you to do with your life. We heard that Rachelle, the Twietmeyers, Noelle, and Adoniram and Ann dared to follow Jesus into places that were troublesome. I wonder if we will? Will you and I dare faith that transforms lives? Will we as a church dare faith that transforms lives? Will we follow Christ into places we would rather not go? Will we engage people who might trouble us? Will we dare to follow Jesus and challenge the principalities and powers of our day, demanding they be concerned with the welfare of all people?

If we are willing for our faith to be daring, I have no doubt that will be transformed in ways that we can't yet imagine. I know that my thirteen years as a chaplain transformed me again and again. Where will you dare to go? Will you dare to engage others? Let's be daring for that sake of the gospel Jesus proclaimed and fully lives. Amen.