

“Cut It Down”
Matthew 10:29-31
July 28, 2019

Before I was ordained to the ministry, I attended services one Sunday up in Roxbury, near Boston. It was your typical New England meetinghouse: white frame, clear windows - you get the picture. The order of worship looked comfortably conventional. But when they got to the scripture lessons, I was blown away, to put it mildly. Instead of turning to the Bible, they picked up the previous day's New York Times, and read an editorial about hunger.

Like Calvin Coolidge's pastor, who declared himself opposed to sin, I cannot say that I'm in favor of hunger. But then and there I resolved never to do anything like that myself should I ever find myself in a pulpit. I had heard of churches that had an Old Testament reading, a New Testament reading, and a NOW Testament reading, whatever that was supposed to be. But as for me, I would stick to a more traditional way of leading worship: there would be no Hartford Courant or Washington Post in MY pulpit!

But something Kyle said to me two weeks ago got me to thinking - which can be a dangerous thing! I'm not sure that what follows is what Kyle had in mind, in which case you can blame me, not him. So while I'm not reading to you from a newspaper this morning, today's sermon is based on a few lines from the third verse of the hymn we just sang together, along with a bit of Matthew's gospel which we heard just before. The words are these: “Whenever I am tempted, whenever clouds arise, when songs give place to sighing, when hope within me dies: I draw the closer to Him, from care He sets me free: His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.”

Sometimes I wonder how much we really mean what we sing, and how often we just mouth the words. That too, by the way, goes for not just what we sing in hymns, but also in our Doxology and the Gloria Patri. We could also throw The Lord's Prayer into that as well, because sometimes it seems like we are reciting the prayer rather than actually praying it.

Do we really mean, do we really understand, those words from the third verse of “His Eye Is on the Sparrow”? How much do they describe our own personal experience? And if they don’t, I wonder if the message of Civilla Martin, the woman who composed the poem around a century ago, has really sunk in. Her poem was inspired, in turn, by a friend of hers who was long advanced in years, and confined to a wheelchair. Yet her naturally cheerful disposition remained. So let’s listen to the third verse again:

“Whenever I am tempted, whenever clouds arise, when songs give place to sighing, when hope within me dies: I draw the closer to Him, from care He sets me free: His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.”

If we think about it, we just might come to the conclusion that instead of telling it like it is, the hymn describes exactly the opposite of what some of us usually do whenever things don’t go right, whenever clouds trouble the horizons of our lives, whenever we are more down than up.

How many of us, in the face of adversity, roll up into a little ball, getting all wrapped up in ourselves? How many of us indulge feelings of self-pity instead of opening up to others who really do care, who are concerned, who are willing to help? How many of us turn away from God, away from God’s compassion, away from God’s church, away from God’s people instead of reaching out for whatever comfort, compassion, and care God can give?

I used to pastor a congregation where, if someone isn’t in church for a while, the first thought that entered some people’s minds was, “OK, what’s wrong with them?” the assumption being that the absent party is mad at the church, or at the minister, or at another parishioner, or at God himself. And very often, that is exactly the case. Instead of trying to solve the problem, some erstwhile church-goers nurse their grudges. One reason is that we can then blame our problems on someone else - from a Sunday School teacher to God Almighty, there are a lot of convenient targets. All too often it’s so much easier to blame, and point fingers, than to fix something.

And let's face it: sometimes it feels so good to think we are punishing someone for something: God hasn't given you a good break? You can punish God by not going to church. Did the minister say something you don't agree with? Stop putting money in the collection plate. Did a board or committee make some decision you don't agree with? Why not show 'em by turning into an obstructionist.

We have all heard that in deceiving others, we only deceive ourselves. That same kind of logic can apply here - that as we sow, so shall we reap. The punishment becomes ours, and the obstruction blocks our own path to healthy living. As the scientists tell us, for every action there is an equal and opposite re-action. That is why Paul echoes Jesus' words in saying that we should return good for the evil done to us. Because if we return evil, that evil will come back to us, darkening our lives, blemishing our own souls all the more in the process.

Put another way, philosophers tell us that all too often we become what we oppose. And while I'm not in the habit of quoting the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche in the pulpit, I like the way he put it when he wrote: "Beware when fighting monsters that you do not become a monster: for when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."

There is a better way to deal with these kinds of dangerous situations that provoke, annoy, and arouse within us what we may think is righteous indignation, but is more often *self*-righteous in origin. To illustrate, let me share an old story.

About 150 years ago a lady in Lexington, Virginia showed Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate forces during the Civil War, the scarred remains of what had obviously been a magnificent tree on her front lawn. During a raid, all its limbs had been shot off by Yankee artillery. Thinking the General would share her sense of outrage and loss, she waited expectantly for him to comment. Finally, Lee spoke: "Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it."

The Apostle Paul knew the importance of cutting down some things from our past and forgetting them. He wrote in Philippians, “Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it on my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead: I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature be thus minded.”

Whatever stands between us and a greater service to God needs to be rooted out of our lives. It is always a good time to “cut it down and forget it.” In surrendering all that provokes, annoys, and vexes us, we will come closer to the One who can most perfectly heal us, restore us, and comfort us. For “are not two sparrows sold for one penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

“So whenever we are tempted, whenever clouds arise; when songs give place to sighing, when hope within us dies: Draw the closer to Him, from care He’ll set you free. For His eye is on the sparrow, and you know, He cares for thee.”

Let us pray: