

“To Stand By, Consenting”

Acts 6:8-14; 7:54-8:1a

November 17, 2019

I have a couple of friends whom I have not mentioned before. I guess they are originally friends of Susan's, because Susan and Stephanie were high school classmates on Long Island. Stephanie and her husband, Larry, are overseas missionaries. For decades they served in Brazil, where they raised their three children - one of whom now does relief work in the war-torn province of Darfur in Sudan. These days Larry and Stephanie are now based in the U.K., from where they support Christian communities in Arab north Africa - an area where such work is illegal, and can be punished by death. They are both very committed Christians, and are very certain that they are doing God's will.

In the face of such Christianity, it is inevitable that occasionally I am forced to consider my own pilgrimage of faith. Would I have raised my own children in the Third World? Would I have subjected them to perils which I cannot even begin to imagine? Was I called to pay such a price? Was I prepared to pay the price?

As Congregationalists, the majority of us would say that, as Christians, we are on a life-long pilgrimage, seeking and growing in our faith. And as our scripture lesson this morning makes painfully clear, there is a price to pay for going on that journey. For Judas, the cost was measured in pieces of silver. For Peter, the cost was measured in denying Jesus three times. At the cross, virtually every disciple - John is a notable exception - deserted Jesus when He most needed their support. They could not pay the price of faithfulness.

We all know the words uttered by Christ on the Cross - “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.” We piously apply those words to those who actually crucified Jesus - yet might not those words also apply to most of the disciples as well? And that would mean that those words apply to you, and to me.

We all know that most of the disciples did indeed redeem themselves - they regrouped, replenished their numbers, and carried out Jesus' command to go and preach and baptize. But what price did they pay? What was the cost of their discipleship? Not only did many of them have to live hard lives on the road, subjected to scorn, criticism, and persecution, but virtually every one of them died a martyr's death. Even Peter, the Rock, who betrayed his Friend three times in the hours leading up to the execution carried out at Golgotha, was himself crucified upside down. So was Andrew, whose Cross which carried him was in the shape of the letter X, which today, as the flag of Scotland, makes up part of the Union Jack.

Yes, the cost can be high. But then, our faith didn't really begin on a starry night with angels singing over the shepherds' fields, as we will soon be celebrating in a few weeks. It's so easy to come and worship at the manger. But no, our faith didn't begin there. It began at the Cross. No Christian that I know of wears a tiny little manger around their neck to proclaim their faith. And it is a Cross that we face when we come here to worship every Sunday. That's not an accident, nor is it a coincidence.

Indeed, the Crucifixion stands out as the central event - the originating event - of our faith ... not only because we acknowledge what happened so many centuries ago, but also because we recognize *our part in it*. And that is perhaps the noblest thing we Christians have ever done - to own the Cross, to make it our symbol. For as the Apostle states, the Cross should have been a stumbling block to faith, symbolizing failure, shame, and defeat. Yet, it does not - but only because at the Cross we acknowledge our responsibility, and our guilt.

If we had buried the Cross, if we had pretended that the Crucifixion hadn't happened, then it WOULD be our stumbling block - for it is only when we own up to our actions, when we face them, it is only then that we can grow, it is only then that we can face God.

Our scripture lesson this morning seems so remote from our own experience. I'll venture that none of us here would never dream of picking up a rock and stoning someone to death. After all, Christ said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." But remember, it's not just those who picked up a rock who were guilty in the death of the first Christian martyr. For our scripture lesson this morning closes with the reminder that Saul - who would later be transformed into the Apostle Paul - that Saul stood by and did nothing, said nothing, and by his acceptance of that day's events consented to Stephen's death. Saul might as well have hurled the stone that shattered the martyr's skull.

It was very easy for Saul to stand aside, consenting. It is so much easier to stand on the sidelines and not get involved. For the risk is too great. The cost of discipleship can be so high. To get involved might mean getting hurt, might mean becoming alienated from your friends - you know, the ones actually throwing the stones. The cost would be too great ... and after all, it would all, soon, be over. And so, yes, it was done. Christ was crucified, and the first martyr, Stephen, was dead. The dead could be buried, the future would obliterate the past, and we could go on our merry way.

Except ... we can't. As any student of psychoanalysis would tell you, unless confronted, the injustices of the past remain. They fester. They grow. And if we don't confront injustice and our role in it, our past will confront us over, and over, again.

For the Gospel exacts a price. If anyone knows that, surely God the Father does: For He so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son. God paid a price. At Calvary. As did Jesus. As did the disciples. As did Stephen. And whether we consciously follow Christ or not, I can assure you that none of the rest of us will reach the end of our own lives unscathed, and unscarred.

Unscathed, and unscarred! Do we need to be reminded that scars are not bad? Scars mean that something was so important for us that we fought, that we put ourselves on the line, that we stood for a person, for an ideal, for a belief that we were willing to

take a risk for. And that is what Christianity is about - taking a stand for what is right, and faithful, and true. Christianity does not call us to remain on the sidelines, watching and consenting. Rather, it calls us to action, to engagement.

That action may involve selling all your possessions and leaving your family - or it may mean doing something even more difficult. Each one of us needs to take a closer look at our Christianity, and how we practice it. Each and every one of us sitting here this Sunday will play a role in the future of this faith community, whether by our absence, or through our engagement with it. We won't all be asked to pay the same price. And I cannot tell each of you, individually, what that cost might be. But we need to live our Christianity in such a way that we are somehow worthy of the One who willingly walked the long road to the Cross in order to show us what true love can be.

The cost for Him involved sacrifice, and pain. Yet our heavenly Father decided, long ago, that you and I were worth that sacrifice. If God had decided otherwise, where would we be? Where would we be if God had stood by, consenting to our spiritual death?

Let us pray: