

February 28, 2010: SACRIFICING EGO
Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35; Psalm 27
Springwater Presbyterian Church -- Eileen Parfrey

The good news was that my sister stopped the deer eating her garden at the cabin while she was gone during the week. The bad news was that she used a repellent made of fox urine, which was like rolling out a red carpet for the area fox population. Every evening at dusk, a trio of foxes stops by for hors d'oeuvres at her bird feeder before heading out for the evening's hunt. Hanging Horn Lake foxes no longer fear humans, and a fearless wild animal is a dangerous one. Isle Royale National Park in Lake Superior has learned that the hard way. Fox there have become so fearless that the Park Service has posted signs warning backpackers of the fox threat to human camping gear. My favorite sign is one that reads, "How far can you hike with one boot?"

Herod is a fox today, Jesus is the hen. First century historian Josephus characterizes Herod as cunning, but also incredibly unscrupulous. When Jesus calls Herod a fox, the title diminishes him from powerful dictator to an annoying, petty thief. Jesus blows off a warning about someone who, in a few weeks, will help arrange for his execution. What was about to happen in Jerusalem was inevitable at this point. Maybe for Jesus the danger isn't Herod. Maybe for Jesus the danger is being distracted from his mission.¹

To hear the gospel-writers, Jesus' mission was not dying on the cross. He himself said his mission was proclaiming God's Kingdom and inviting humans to a changed way of living. Jesus *never* asked people to worship him, nor did he think he was setting up a new religion.² If Jesus had come to hand out theology degrees, Herod would not have perceived a threat. Paul urges us today in Philippians to allow God to change us (to be transformed), which is what validates our citizenship in God's Kingdom (be conformed). Richard Rohr skips the Bible when he contends, "Jesus invited us into a Great Participative Love." In other words, Herod's not the problem. In fact, Rohr says, "Through Jesus, we all have to face the embarrassing truth that *we ourselves* are our primary problem. . . . Our greatest temptation is to try to change other people instead of ourselves. Jesus allowed *himself* to be transformed and *thus* transformed others. That is the meaning of the necessary death of Jesus."³ Necessary death? The "necessity" of Jesus' death is our need to discover we've only got one hiking boot.

That is always a threat to the powers-that-be. What made Jesus such a threat was that his mission was to the people who are written off by the powerful, by the religious establishment, by bullies. Jesus' mission is to those who are more concerned with God than with defending theological positions. His mission isn't with people who are *right*; it is with Herod's victims.

What could possibly bother Herod about that? Not much danger in the guy who serves soup at Sisters of the Road or hands out shower tickets at St Vincent on Burnside. It's not very subversion to distribute laundry

¹ Dan Clendenin, "Don't Fear the Thief," www.journeywithjesus.net, posted February 22, 2010

² Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now*, p. 109 ff

³ Richard Rohr, adapted from *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*, p. 195.

powder to people who live in their cars. Rome isn't going to be overthrown by the person who offers literacy classes to teen-aged prostitutes or free dental care to indigents. What scares Herod about Jesus is that he didn't go along to get along. Jesus is committed to being a "citizen of heaven," rather than Rome. He's not even a member of what Paul suggests is the religion of the belly. I'm not sure what that is. Maybe it's hedonists who live for bodily pleasure, or people so hung up about religious purity laws that they make live miserable for others, or folks so wrapped up in giving up chocolate for Lent they can't think of anything but chocolate.

If we're going to take Jesus' name and claim to follow him, we risk threatening the world's annoying, petty thieves. Unless the foxes can distract us. Session named some of those distractions at its annual joint planning retreat with the deacons. Our exercise was to name the things we could *stop* doing. I thought we'd come up with a list of activities to give up. Instead, we made a list of style characteristics, things like, making church just "something we fit in;" guilting people into serving; taking on too much; worrying about money; allowing divisions, not sharing information; doing ministry alone; driving ourselves to accomplish God's mission rather than being driven by God.

We *know* what distracts us, and it's not always Herod. It's easy to misread today's Philippians text. We live in a concrete world, expressing our lives and faith in concrete ways, what we call "practices." Paul isn't dissing those concrete practices when he disparages the belly, but if the concrete world is the only one we know, that's the spiritual equivalent of hiking with one boot. The things we spend our time doing, what we shell out our hard-earned cash to acquire, what we'll drop everything else to do, the time sinks that suck us away from what we'd rather be doing—*those* are concrete practices, the belly practices, that express our citizenship. They say more eloquently than anything else where we put our allegiance. In our chronic state of run, run, run, we have so many commitments that we can't commit to anything.

My niece Kelly's job is helping developmentally disabled adults acquire independent living skills. She teaches the things that come naturally for us—how to get on a bus and pay the correct fare, purchasing groceries, doing laundry, not over-spending your bank account, planning activities for the weekend. I read on her Facebook page that last week that she made a presentation to a transitional lifestyles class in a local high school. The class is for young people working on a high school equivalency diploma through their special education program. They need to demonstrate mastery of certain life skills in order to graduate. Speaking of distractions, Kelly said the students texted through her entire presentation. The message they projected was, "This is so booooring, I know all this stuff," which was ironic, since most of them don't know their own address.

Jesus didn't have the option of Twittering about Herod's threat. Social networking in the 1st century was a little more primitive. It was more along the lines of Paul's saying "imitate me." Come to think of it, that might be more effective for people just trying to hike with only one boot. Jesus and the kingdom lifestyle he was proclaiming offered a way to live *despite* fears and the threats of Herod and his foxy ilk. Paul's "imitate me" isn't about arrogance, it's about concrete lifestyle choices. *Practices* that move us to transformation, move

us to a kingdom *lifestyle*, not right thoughts or toe-the-line doctrine. How is our lifestyle different from that of the culture in which we live? Session said we need to simplify, to make fewer time demands, do more prayer and Bible study. They were talking about commitment and follow through, less accomplishing and more being. The apostle Paul is asking believers not simply to “believe” correctly or “behave” nicely. He’s asking us to look at the meaning of what we do in relationship to a power and reality larger and more loving than the other demands for our earthly citizenship. Think about it.

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