

Go and tell that fox

Paul encouraged the Philippians to imitate him – and others who lived out their example. And the reason Paul could encourage them to do that was because he – and the others – were imitating Christ. In essence, he was saying, “Hey! We’re living the way Christ lived and we want you all to live that way, too!” Now, I can just hear some of you saying to yourselves, “Oh, brother... here we go again with Paul! I’ve never like that guy – he was SO conceited! I mean, who goes around saying that... ‘Imitate me ‘cause I’m so great!’”? Paul’s Jewish chutzpah really rubs our Anabaptist humility the wrong way. It’s true. The Apostle Paul was pretty clear about what it meant to live the way Jesus lived. He had never met Jesus in the flesh, mind you, but he had certainly encountered him and experienced his Spirit.

There’ve been others who’ve encouraged people to imitate them, maybe not in so many words, but for sure in their actions. Gandhi, King, Rosa Parks, the Christian Peacemaker Team members... you can always tell the ones that are really following the lead of Jesus – they’re the ones who make the politicians and those in power the most nervous. I believe I heard Pope Francis taking Paul’s advice to heart on Thursday. Did you hear him? Here’s my paraphrase of what I heard him say. “Go and tell that red, floppy-haired fox for me that he doesn’t scare me or intimidate me, because I have work to do. I have a Holy Year of Mercy to tend to – an Extraordinary Jubilee which has, at its center, the mercy of God. We want to live in the light of the word of the Lord: Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Extending extraordinary mercy means building bridges, not building walls.”

So, what does it mean to follow the example of Jesus... and Paul... and others who imitate them? How does one muster that kind of chutzpah? And how does one know for sure what Jesus would have done – how is one clear that imitating Jesus is, indeed, what one is doing? I believe these passages give us at least three markers by which we can gauge that.

First, is the action or behavior authentic to one’s gifts and calling? Jesus of Nazareth, Paul the Apostle, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the Jesuit from Buenos Aires, who became Pope Francis... they all had (or have) what Parker Palmer calls the “birthright gift of self” that led them authentically to the ways they lived and the witness they offered. It would not have worked for them to have been anyone other than who they were – just as it does not work for each of US to be anyone other than who WE are! In his small treasure of a book called *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer writes, “I first learned about vocation growing up in the church. I value much about the religious tradition in which I was raised; its humility about its own convictions, its respect for the world’s diversity, its concern for justice. But the idea of ‘vocation’ that I picked up in those circles created distortion until I grew strong enough to discard it. I mean the idea that vocation, or calling, comes from a voice external to ourselves, a voice of moral demand that asks us to become someone we are not yet – someone different, someone better, someone just beyond our reach.

That concept of vocation is rooted in a deep distrust of selfhood, in the belief that the sinful self will always be ‘selfish’ unless corrected by external forces of virtue. It is a notion that made me feel inadequate to the task of living my own life, creating guilt about the distance between who I was and who I was supposed to be, leaving me exhausted as I labored to close the gap.

Today I understand vocation quite differently – not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.

It is a strange gift, this birthright gift of self. Accepting it turns out to be even more demanding than attempting to become someone else! I have sometimes responded to that demand by ignoring the gift, or hiding it, or fleeing from it, or squandering it – and I think I am not alone. There is a Hasidic tale that reveals, with amazing brevity, both the universal tendency to want to become someone else and the ultimate importance of becoming one’s self: Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, “In the coming world, they will not ask me: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me: ‘Why were you not Zusya?’” In our imitation of Christ, we must be our true selves, responding to the God-given gifts within us.

Second, to imitate Christ, one must find the unusual combination of humble confidence. Within the span of four verses, Jesus practically spits Herod Antipas out of his mouth, dismissing him as a fearful, power-hungry buffoon, calling him a fox while confidently reciting his own itinerary and schedule, crystal clear about his revolutionary work and prophetic tasks. Then, in a dramatic shift, he humbly acknowledges his vulnerable position as he heads straight into Jerusalem and refers to himself as a mother hen, longing to protect her chicks. Everyone knows how dangerous a fox is to a hen and her chicks... a hen is no match for a fox.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Given the number of animals available, it is curious that Jesus chooses a hen. Where is the biblical precedent for that? What about the mighty eagle of Exodus, or Hosea’s stealthy leopard? What about the proud lion of Judah, mowing down his enemies with a roar? Compared to any of those, a mother hen does not inspire much confidence. No wonder some of the chicks decide to go with the fox.

But a hen is what Jesus chooses, which – if you think about it – is pretty typical of him. He is always turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind up on top while kings and scholars land on the bottom. He is always wrecking our expectations of how things should turn out by giving prizes to losers and paying the last first. So of course he chooses a chicken, which is about as far from a fox as you can get. That way the options become very clear; you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks. Jesus won’t be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles (no weapons at all – concealed or otherwise). All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first.

Which he does, as it turns out. He slides up on her one night in the yard while all the babies are asleep. When her cry awakens them, they scatter. She dies the next day where both foxes and chickens can see her – wings spread, breast exposed – without a single chick beneath her feathers.”

As Paul writes to the young church in Philippi, he is asking them to be chickens in the world. He is reminding his readers that in the midst of the military might of Caesar Augustus and the flurry of commercialization and money-making that goes on in their Macedonian province, Jesus, the crucified mother hen is Lord, not Caesar.

Upside-down. Counter-intuitive. Jesus. And Paul is reminding them – and us – to imitate this example. Paul himself is writing from prison where he is vulnerable and exposed. His letter reminds us that Jesus’ way of humble confidence is the way to The Kingdom and it is in *this* kingdom where our citizenship lies.

A third marker by which we can gauge whether we’re authentically imitating Jesus is whether our actions lead, nonviolently, to something bigger than ourselves, giving voice to the voiceless, addressing issues of injustice. Do our actions help to tip the “arc of the moral universe towards justice”? to use Martin Luther King, Jr’s phrase. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, says Jesus. Herod, despite his prominent role in Temple rituals, is not that one. Herod comes in his own name, for his own sake, desiring his own power. And Herod lives in overwhelming fear of losing the power he has gained. The one who comes in the name of the Lord will hold up to the people a vision of hope, liberation, and justice. This has always been the vision of God.” (“That Fox! The Temptations of Herod and the 2016 Hunger Games” <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/that-fox-the-temptations-of-herod-and-the-2016-hunger-games/>)

As Parker Palmer writes, “Rosa Parks took her stand with clarity and courage. I took mine by diversion and default. Some journeys are direct, and some are circuitous; some are heroic, and some are fearful and muddled. But every journey, honestly undertaken stands a chance of taking us toward the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” May it be so for each of us. Amen. I invite you to join in reading the words of Confession and Reconciling as they’re printed in the bulletin...