

The Power of Confrontation

Genesis 15:1-7; Luke 13:31-34

March 17, 2019

As we prepare to hear the scripture for today, let's think about how we approach the Word. Biblical Interpretation is a required course in just about any seminary one might choose to attend. The formal term is *exegesis*, which means you are making a researched, critical interpretation of a particular text. One simply must consider the context of the writing. Good exegetical work insures a good grade in one's preaching class. The opposite of that though, is "isegesis," which is not even really a word. But - isegesis is what we were guilty of doing if we selected a text and gave it an interpretation according to something we wanted it to say. Preaching professors were quick to recognize isegesis, and we were always called out for "reading into the text" something we wanted to say. Let's listen, and do some exegetical work to see what Luke was trying to tell us in this passage...read Luke 13:31-34.

There are at least four important dynamics in these brief four verses. Let's explore the framework, and find where we find ourselves in the picture.

First, Jesus was absolutely determined to go to Jerusalem. Everyone who has anything to do with Jesus knows that Jerusalem is a dangerous place for Jesus to go. I appreciate that there are some Pharisees who try to warn Jesus not to go there. It cautions us to refrain from over generalizing a whole swath of people because of the behavior of some. "Pharisees" usually have a pretty bad reputation, because most of the ones we read about are extremely obsessive about following the Law at all costs. It was Jesus's interpretation of the Law: healing on the Sabbath and touching unclean people, and other things that were strictly, absolutely, and vehemently forbidden by some Pharisees that got him into so much trouble with some of them, and other religious rulers. But here are some Pharisees who know there are powerful leaders - of their very group - in Jerusalem, who want him silenced. "Please, don't go to Jerusalem, Jesus!" No..., nothing will deter Jesus from going to Jerusalem. Nothing. At. All. What seems clear, no matter what is put in Jesus' way, Jesus will, no matter what, make his way to Jerusalem.

Next, King Herod is named in this passage. This is actually very strange, because Herod is not in Jerusalem. Pilate, who is in Jerusalem, will eventually give Jesus the death sentence. Maybe Herod is named here because of the interplay that later occurs between these two Roman officials. What is really important, and very rare, in this account, is what Jesus says about Herod. "You tell that fox...!" that I have work to do, and I am going to do it! Jesus actually confronts one who has earthly power over him and calls him out for the ruthless, conniving, and deceitful character that Herod really is. Jesus is totally justified in making this accusation, speaking truth to power, and naming the injustice of his offender. Confrontation is a healthy thing - when it is accurate.

I remember another instance of Confrontation that surprised me a little. I was at a Pastoral Counseling Conference where the speaker presented a Case Study about a man struggling with therapy and motivation. He had lost a leg, refused to participate in physical therapy, and was almost belligerent with his care givers. He complained that no one cared about him, no one came to see him, and there was no use for him to try to recover from his loss. The reality though, was that he was surrounded by a caring and very sympathetic staff, received frequent visits from his family and friends, and was a strong candidate for an artificial leg. The Presenter asked if anyone had a recommendation for this patient. In my mind, I was thinking that someone just needed to listen to this man's grief and offer some understanding. But another person spoke up: "Someone needs to do a reality check with this guy. He has plenty of support all around him, but he has to do his part, too." MUCH to my surprise, the Presenter said: "Exactly. Confrontation done in a spirit of love can be the most loving thing to do." All of us need structure, guidance, and encouragement. When we hear confrontation offered in a spirit of love, instead of judgment, criticism, or condemnation, then soon - or eventually..., we can respond.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem..." We get the allegiance Jesus felt toward the city of the heritage of his faith. What a beautiful analogy to liken his loyalty and affection to that of a mother hen who longs to embrace her chicks

under her wings. Jesus had a deep and enduring relationship with his mother. Of course, we know Jesus' relationship with his holy Father was phenomenal, but after his birth, we never hear a word about Joseph. Mary was the earthly guide. Mary knew how to nurture her son's learning, sometimes encouraging him to action before he realized he was ready. She was the one always by his side, even unto death.

We know what it is like to be able to just collapse into someone's arms who loves us unconditionally. Jesus would have - and did - even in its rejection of him, embraced all of Jerusalem in his loving arms, if only they would listen. They needed some confrontation all right, but all they had to do was to let themselves be loved, and respond accordingly.

Eileen Linder told a powerful story at one of the Montreal Peacemaking Conferences. It seems there was a mother who received a phone call from the hospital that indicated her daughter might have been in an accident, and could the mother please come. She started off to the hospital and began that prayer with which we can all identify, going down the list with God, hoping to influence the outcome.

"Please God, don't let it be MY daughter. Maybe it is somebody else."

"Please God, if it IS my daughter, let her be okay."

"Please God, if she is hurt, please let it be something from which she can recover."

The mother arrived at the hospital and received the news that no mother ever wants to hear. It was her daughter, she did suffer a terrible injury, and she did die.

In a fairly brief time after the mother learned this tragic report, the people from the organ transplant unit came to ask her if she thought her daughter might have wanted to donate her heart to help save someone else's life. The mother only needed a few minutes to realize that "Yes," that is what her daughter would have wanted.

It happened that the person who received this life sustaining organ was a local pastor. After a few months, when the pastor had pretty much recovered from this amazing gift, he felt the need to express his appreciation. Of course, he had no idea who the donor might have been, so he decided to write a letter to the editor of the newspaper. You just don't do that..., but this minister did.

Well..., you know the mother saw the letter. She called the pastor. "In the fact that you have revealed yourself in this public manner, I would like to come visit you." Of course, replied the pastor.

So the mother went to his house. She had taken photos of her daughter so the minister might appreciate the life she had lived, and that he could now live, because of her gift to him. The minister shared photos of his family, and they had a very beautiful exchange of dreams, wishes, and care for each other. When it was time for the mother to leave, she asked the pastor for one last favor. "If you don't mind, could I place my ear on your chest and hear my daughter's heartbeat one last time?" She did that, and then she left.

Eileen Linder then made an even more profound connection to finish this story. She said: "Isn't this like what God is saying to us, the members of this great and wonderful Church? Jesus has given us his heart, and God is asking us if God can listen to the heartbeat of his son through what we, and God's church everywhere... are doing?"

Perhaps in Jesus' resoluteness to go to Jerusalem, to confront the dangers, to express the love of a mother, and to invite us to take up his cause, we can gain inspiration for our own resoluteness. In this Lent, in this moment, we need to know that something or someone outside of ourselves is necessary to keep us going. It is necessary for us to believe in a future that we cannot imagine on our own. We need to catch on to the sense that there is something more than what we know now, a greater quality of brotherly and sisterly love is possible, because Jesus showed us the way. Amen.