

## **The Rev. Mike Angell: Moral courage**

A sermon preached at The Episcopal Church of the Holy Communion, University City MO  
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There is a line in today's Gospel which has always troubled me. It may tell you something of who I am, because the line isn't what you might expect. I am not so troubled by Jesus' warnings about the toppling stones, wars, earthquakes, food-shortages, I suppose those images should make me more nervous, but another line grabs my attention. The line comes toward the end. After Jesus tells his disciples they will be jailed, and questioned by authorities and tribunals, he says this: "Make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance."

Make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance. Jesus tells his followers not to prepare their testimony. Don't write it out. Don't rehearse. Don't think it through. That command always catches my attention. As a preacher, I make my living with prepared words. I believe in the power of language. Words matter.

It could be tempting to take these words of Jesus as an invitation not to spend so much of my week preparing sermon, to trust the Spirit and climb up into this pulpit and say whatever comes to mind. I know there are preachers who do just that. But I don't think that is the courage Jesus has in mind. I'm certain this improvisational style isn't the kind of courage your vestry, your elected church leadership, has in mind. So I'm not going there.

I don't think Jesus means to discourage the writers, to discourage the preachers. As I worked over this troubling command of Jesus', not to prepare, I began to hear a word of encouragement. Jesus wants to give his followers courage, but Jesus is specific about courage. Jesus' courage is about words, yes, but Jesus' admonition is about more than words. Jesus is asking for moral courage. Moral courage is a kind of courage we need in our world.

The King James' Bible renders this verse much closer to the original Greek. "Settle it therefore in your hearts, not to meditate before what ye shall answer." The original Greek says not to set your heart on your answer, it's located a little further down from the mind. Don't settle your heart. Stay open. In the midst of literal trials, literal tribulations, Jesus says, stay open. That openness takes a certain kind of courage, not set your heart on a particular answer. Faced with the worst, Jesus says, don't settle.

Jesus' words bring to mind the words of the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai:

From the place where we are right  
Flowers will never grow  
In the spring.

The place where we are right  
Is hard and trampled  
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
Dig up the world  
Like a mole, a plow.<sup>1</sup>

From the place where we are right, Flowers will never grow. Doubts and loves dig up the world, till the soil. Those inconvenient unsettling loves and doubts, they do the important work. They help us to stay open.

Openness may seem an odd thing to associate with courage. Our images of courage are often more closed, more self assured. I think we confuse courage with swagger in our society. Our world these days is full of flowerless yards, folks who are sure they are right. Perhaps we have staked too much of our terrain. Jesus asks us to be less sure of ourselves, less sure of our words. In fact, Jesus says, leave the words to me. Don't worry about having the right answer. Let me give you mine.

Moral courage means knowing that we aren't in this alone.

The political scientist and philosopher Kristen Renwick Monroe conducted interviews with Germans who lived through the Nazi regime years. She initially focused in on the group we might most like to interview from those years, the folks who rescued their Jewish neighbors from the holocaust, who hid folks in cupboards and in attics. Her research then lead her to interview folks who were bystanders, and even Nazi supporters. We know that those who acted with moral courage, those who hid their neighbors, were few and far between. What set them apart the philosopher and researcher wondered?

Renwick Monroe writes that she found:

Rescuers have self-images that are inclusive and broadly based, with a strong sense of agency; bystanders see themselves as people who are weak on agency, with little control over their lives and little they can do to affect outside events. They think in terms of group identity more than do rescuers, seeing themselves as members of exclusive groups while rescuers see themselves as members of a common humanity...

Finally and ironically, Nazis have a victim mentality, seeing themselves as members of a group that had been treated badly and threatened by Jews, Social Democrats, homosexuals, etc...Nazis were the strongest communitarians, feeling close ties for members of their own self-defined group but having little (if any) regard for those who fell outside their group.<sup>2</sup>

Moral courage asks us to look beyond our selves, beyond our self-defined groups. Moral courage, perhaps counter-intuitively is not about ideology. Moral courage is about solidarity. The difference between those who stood with the Nazis, and those who stood with their Jewish neighbors was two-fold: The rescuers were those who refused to believe that religion, that ethnicity, invalidated common humanity. And rescuers were those who had a sense of agency, a sense that they could do something, they had to do something. Rescuers acted.

In today's Gospel, Jesus makes a pretty radical assumption about his followers. Jesus assumes his followers will be arrested. Jesus assumes his followers will answer to religious authorities and to so-called "civil" authorities. Jesus assumed following him will get you into trouble. Following Jesus will take you places that are unpopular. Following Jesus will find you swimming against the stream of society's assumptions. Following Jesus may land you in jail. "Follow me," Jesus said.

Yesterday marked the 30th anniversary of the brutal murders of the six Jesuits and two support staff members at the University of Central America in El Salvador. This summer our second group from Holy Communion visited the country. We stood in the beautiful tranquil rose garden of the

Theology Center where 30 years ago most of the priest's bodies were found. The priests were targeted because they were speaking out for the poor. They were publishing articles, and giving interviews internationally to draw attention to the suffering in El Salvador.

This summer as I paused in the little museum, at the University, carved out of a converted classroom. I was startled by the day to day objects. Many of the priests' personal effects are on display, books, glasses, swim goggles. But I found myself staring at their passports.

I was surprised because, for the first time, I realized that the majority of these priests who died held dual citizenship. Most had been born in Spain or other developed countries. I was surprised because, at least in the back of my mind, I assumed these professors were stuck in a war zone. I stared at those passports, and I realized, they could have escaped. They could have asked the Jesuit order to find them somewhere safer to teach. And I found myself wondering, "would I have stayed?" After the death of the archbishop, as war raged on in the countryside, as death threats arrived, would I have stayed?

The difficulty about questions of moral courage is that they stubbornly refuse to stay in the past and to stay theoretical.

We live in a time, we live in a state, we live in a country that could use a healthier dose of moral courage. Every week now, we pray for victims of our city's gun violence epidemic. We pray for the children who are losing their lives because our political leaders are unwilling to act. This week in California another child took the lives of his classmates and his own life.

How do we respond? When it feels like our country will just add Santa Clarita to the tally? When it feels like our city is ready to add the next child to the list of over a dozen killed this year? When every child on our city's list is African-American, how do we respond? How do we summon moral courage?

I am not sure I know. I do think the answer is partly the first line of that canticle from Isaiah: "Surely it is God who saves me." It isn't me. The hundreds of folks who come to this building every week for an AA meeting can tell you. No one saves themselves. We have to trust in a higher power. Moral courage isn't about trusting myself. Moral courage is trusting something bigger, looking to be part of something bigger.

Professor Renwick Monroe would tell us: stay open and don't doubt your agency. Know that you can do something. Don't give in to the easy language of intransigence. Organize. Act. Get connected.

Get connected to your neighbors who are losing kids. Get connected to the school teachers who fear a student arriving with a gun. Get connected to the local activists who are working to transform our gun laws. Get connected to the non-profits and the medical professionals working to bring alternatives to violence in our streets. Get connected to the wider work.

And trust that the work isn't yours but God's. Trust that our God is the God who gives Isaiah the vision of the holy mountain where there is no weeping. Trust that God leads you there, as windy as the path may seem.

Don't be sold on the narrative that this gun violence epidemic is a "black on black" problem, or a "problem in poor neighborhoods." Don't let your neighbor be screened out, called other. Moral courage comes when we have a broader vision of self-interest, and a strong sense that we can act together.

The Jesuit martyrs, if we asked how do you summon moral courage, I imagine, would echo Jesus. "Hold fast," they would say. "Stay. Stay with the people. Get close to those who are suffering. Speak the truth." Hold fast. Hang in there. Don't take the easy exit.

The word our translation of the Gospel renders as "lives," you will gain your lives" that word is more often translated as "souls." By your endurance, by hanging in there, you will gain your souls. I imagine, if I were able to interview the Jesuit martyrs, if I were to ask, "how did you decide to stay in El Salvador?" they would answer, "for the sake of our neighbors, for the sake of our souls, how could we decide otherwise?"

Make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance. In a chaotic and troubling reading, Jesus gives startling advice. At least he still startles me. I'm not always morally courageous. I'm not, but I know when I fret about getting the words right, there is a tendency to shrink, to go inside myself.

I also know, Jesus doesn't need you to be smaller. Our world is full of small people. Too often houses of worship are full of small-minded folks, and the preaching is focused on getting those minds smaller. Today, let me tell you, Jesus needs us to grow.

Will we be complicit when lives and human dignity are on the line? Will we be bystanders? Or will we grow our sense of self-interest? Will we act? Will we till our inner soil with doubts and inconvenient love until the flowers again can grow?

Moral courage isn't something we summon in a moment. Moral courage is a learned habit, a habit of trust, a trust that we are part of a bigger story. Moral courage means trusting what seems unlikely, trusting the stubbornly mysterious God, the one who keeps saying "follow me" and then heads off into all the wrong parts of town. The one who says "listen" at all the wrong moments, as all the wrong people are speaking.

Moral courage isn't a well-worn path, it's not popular. But history shows us it is the folks who stay surprisingly open, the ones who make are willing to stand in solidarity with the least likely of communities, the morally courageous are the ones who have the capacity to transform our world. So take courage.

<sup>1</sup> Yehuda Amichai, "The Place Where We are Right." From the collection *A Touch of Grace*. Cited at <http://www.princeton57.org/dynamic.asp?id=Amichai> (accessed 17 November 2019)

<sup>2</sup> Kristen Renwick Monrow "The Roots of Moral Courage" *Greater Good Magazine* 23 June 2010 [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/roots\\_of\\_moral\\_courage](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/roots_of_moral_courage) (accessed 17 November 2019)