

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent

Text: Luke 13:31-35

Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.

February 28, 2010

“KILL ME ALREADY!”

Before we really get started there are a few things I need to say. Yes! I was on vacation and was not here at the Ash Wednesday Service! I always take a winter vacation. My Vacation time hasn't changed - the date of Ash Wednesday is what changes. The Cruise Ship wouldn't change their schedule and I had things here covered. So please stop with the comments already! And lets put another rumor to rest. It was not the Schwartz's who said we would not have fastnachts on Fastnacht Sunday. The majority of the workers had conflicts and were unavailable, not the Schwartz's. And YES! Vicar Stephanie is staying with us for a 2<sup>nd</sup> year. Not because she is failing her Internship and being required to repeat a year. And no, there is no secret plan to slide her into an Associate Pastor's position. It's simply because she's a great worker, she will still be in the area next year and will give us better continuity in ministry. And YES! There are personnel decisions that are made, budget issues that are decided, building repairs that need to be made and policies that need to be implemented, and we can't come to the congregation every time an issue needs to be decided.

Oh The Church! The Church! They Beat up their Pastors and abuse their Leaders! How often have I desired to simply minister to the sick, preach the Gospel, care for the poor and needy, but the Church is not willing to allow me to do that?

Ladies and Gentlemen, what I have just said is not true. Well, some of it is - maybe most of it is. But the point is, I kinda know how Jesus Felt. Look at today's Gospel Lesson:

The Pharisees come Jesus and say, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' (The Holy Place that should welcome prophets). Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

The Tuesday before Ash Wednesday I was in Curacao. It's an island just off the coast of Venezuela. Being Fat Tuesday, it was their "Carnival" time. They had bands, costumes, and parades. It's their version of Mardi Gras. Every year Fat Tuesday comes to an abrupt end at midnight. New Orleans police shut down the Mardi Gras festivities promptly at 12 am in reverence for Ash Wednesday and the beginning

of Lent. The stroke of midnight is the moment that Bourbon Street revelers must give it up.

We always think of “giving up” something for Lent. Some people give up meat. Others give up sweets, or alcohol, or television. I haven’t heard of anyone giving up their cell phone for forty days!

Preacher Kimberly Long tells this story at the beginning of one of her Lenten sermons. Entering church on Ash Wednesday, Nora Gallagher encounters a friend who, when asked what she is giving up for Lent, quips: “Anne’s giving up drinking, Terri’s giving up chocolate, and I’m just giving up” Ever feel like that? “Just giving up”? That’s what they were telling Jesus to do. “Just give up” was the Pharisee’s advice to Jesus. Herod is after you. He has you marked for death. Get out of town quick. Give up your mission here.

When Jesus hears this warning, he surprises those Pharisees by both disregarding and embracing their message. Jesus dismisses the threat of Herod. Herod is nothing but a “sly fox,” forever plotting but powerless against God’s mission in the world. Jesus has his own schedule, his own agenda, his own mission to fulfill, and the time-frame has already been divinely determined.

But Jesus also knows that he will give up. He will give himself up. He will travel to Jerusalem and meet head on the traumatic tradition of that city wrapped up in the phrase — “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it” Jesus will give up everything, even his life, in order to fulfill his eternal mission of salvation. They wanted Jesus to just give up and leave, but Jesus was more determined to continue with his father’s mission.

This past week I was remembering where the phrase “my hat’s in the ring” came from? Early in the nineteenth century there were “rules” for fighting. Boxing adhered to certain standards governing the beginnings and endings of matches. Even though it was a dangerous, bloody sport, there were protocols to follow. Long before boxing matches took place under the bright lights of a Las Vegas auditorium, it was a street event. Crowds cheered on their champion, booed the bad guy, squabbled, screeched, caused a ruckus and made a racket. When one fight ended, the only way for the next potential fighter to get the attention of the winner was not verbal, but visual. Drowned out by the crowd the next contender declared his intention to fight by tossing his hat into the fighting ring. “Throwing your hat into the ring” soon became a figure of speech, as well as an actual act. Along with this symbol for fighting, boxing also had a

symbol for disengagement - for quitting. A match that started with a hat thrown into the ring might end with someone “throwing in the towel.” When a fighter had been pummeled, beaten to a pulp, but still wasn’t going “down for the count,” the fighter’s coach or manager could literally “throw in the towel,” heave a rolled up towel into the ring as a sign of giving up. Like a white flag on a battle field, the white towel thrown onto the canvas signaled that the fight was over. There was a winner and there was a loser.

“Giving up” is a dirty word in American culture. The only time “giving up” is embraced is during the forty days of Lent. And even then, we carefully choose what exactly it is we will give up. The more mundane and peripheral the better. We can “give up” chocolate or movies or parties. But do we ever really “give up” control over our own lives? Do we ever give up the illusion that if we just work hard enough, act fast enough, believe fervently enough, we will never have to “give up” anything, that we can achieve anything?

Mostly everyone has watched a contestant on “American Idol” while cringing and hiding and peeking out behind something? I confess: sometimes I can’t stare direct at the screen out of sheer embarrassment for the performer. Some contestants are hopelessly off-key. They are without rhythm, awkward, and just plain awful. Yet after being jilted by the judges, booed and booted out of the audition room, how many of those wannabe Idols look into the camera and declare, “I’m not going to stop trying.” “This is just going to make me work harder.” “I will never give up!” “No one’s going to dampen my dreams.” “I refuse to let Simon Cowell rain on my parade.” These people don’t need to give up on life. But they do need to give up on a singing career.

Jesus didn’t “give up” to Herod’s threats or the Pharisee’s warnings. But Jesus did “give himself up” to God’s divine plan for salvation. Jesus did not “give up” to his own safety, security, and self-preservation. But Jesus did “give himself up” and embrace his Messianic identity and mission. Jesus did “give it up” to the place and purpose God had designed especially for him, that only he could fulfill.

When Jesus was Hanging on the Cross the Pharisees and Sadducees were probably saying, “NOW he has to throw in the towel” - while Jesus was saying, “NOW I am throwing my hat into the ring.” After all the betrayals, plots against him, and words of discouragement, it’s as though he’s saying: “KILL ME ALREADY!!!” Let’s get on with it! When they thought it was ending, Jesus knew it was just beginning. And the only way that could happen is when Jesus gave himself up to do his Father’s Will.

Are we ready to “throw our hat into the ring” and accept a new challenge, a new mission, a God-charted direction and design for our lives? What would happen this Lenten season if instead of giving up chocolate or red meat we gave up command and control of our life and trusted GOD to direct our life? What would happen if this Lent we gave up thinking that the life we are living right now is the only life we will ever know?

What would happen if this Lent, after throwing in the towel of your own control over your life, you “threw your hat into the ring” of God’s uncharted territory and divine possibilities? I think we’d find that the petty things in the Church - and in life - would seem less important. When we know we are doing what God calls us to do, it’s as though we are allowing God to gather us together as a hen gathers her chicks. So what would God really want us to give up for Lent? I think God would want us to give up control, and to allow God to control our life. Amen