

August 15, 2010 – Rev. Anne E. Hodges-Copple [PDF] (Jeremiah 23:23-29; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56)

There were hymns I did not know, let alone sang. There were hymns I just did not sing when I was growing up in my downtown Episcopal church in Dallas, Texas. One of those hymns goes like this, I think: “I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus” and on and on. Something about no turning back now, no turning back. That was just a little too Jesus-y for my downtown, proper Episcopal church. That was just a little too up close and personal for my very proper, staid, reserved Episcopal church. It was just a hymn that I did not know and I am sorry for that. And grateful for the fact that some of my brothers and sisters from the Baptist tradition and the Methodist tradition, grateful that brothers and sisters who first sang that tune and that hymn burned out of great necessity and travail could bring such a strong sense of commitment to the Gospel.

There’s also some hymns I sang as a child, but became increasingly uncomfortable with. “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war. Stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross.” Great hymns, marching hymns, unless you found yourself as a child of the sixties and as an emerging young adult of the seventies torn with the great ambivalences of the meaning of war, unless you were brought up in a church that talked a lot about the King of Peace and a Good Shepherd that welcomes all the sheep, it was hard to know what to do with hymns that commanded such a depth and certainty of faith. Yes, I like to stick with the Prince of Peace, the Gentle Shepherd, green pastures that are comfortable and pleasant.

So what the heck is going on with Jesus in this morning’s Gospel? Fire, swords, division. Mother-in-laws are quaking in their seat. Sons-in-law, too. What the heck is going on with Jesus? Well, it’s decision time in the Gospel of Luke. It’s decision time. Sadducees, Pharisees, Jews who have been preparing for the arrival of the Messiah, Jews and even Gentiles must decide who is this man. What is he asking of us? What is this path, what is this baptism he speaks of? Baptism? I want to hear about a christening gown and a cake from Costco. That’s the kind of baptism I like. I don’t believe that’s the kind of baptism Jesus was talking about. It’s crunch time. It’s decision time. It’s time to ask what does it take to stand up and decide to follow Jesus.

But of course that was a different time back in first century Palestine. That was the time of the Roman empire. That was the time of an oppressive government. That was a time when armies were used to keep the peace. That was a time for empire building. That was a time when the world was divided by race and class and culture. We don’t live in that kind of world, do we? We don’t live in a world where one government will use its military might to subdue another people in another country. We don’t live in a world where religious authorities are more interested in protecting and promoting their own wealth and power than in taking personal risks for the sake of the Gospel. No, we live in a world where we are ruled by a desire for safety in our homes, security for the future and a minimizing of any nasty conflicts that might interrupt our peace and quiet. That’s the prince of peace we’re looking for.

But is that faithful living? Is that following Jesus? What does it take to follow Jesus now? Beautiful churches, great trees and wonderful drought resistant shrubs, good signs? I am for all

these things, but not if it makes us forget that what it takes to follow Jesus is a community of Christian character. It takes people who have been and are and will be able to stand up in the hour of need with courage, with compassion and with a community of faith to steady them in a time of trial. The letter to the Hebrews reminds the early Christian community that's suffering terrible persecution of the powerful witnesses, the cloud of witnesses that have gone before. The author of the letter to the Hebrews reminds the young Christian community that they are on a long and difficult race and it will take perseverance and it will take patience and it will take keeping our eyes upon Jesus and keeping our hope upon the future to come. Compassion, courage and the community of Christ.

It's time for us to remember this cloud of witnesses and to name them again. To think about Mary, the mother of Jesus, whose feast day we celebrate tomorrow. Now, she was no empire builder. Maybe she didn't die a physical death, but you know she died a million deaths in watching the suffering of her son and she persevered. She had to turn against every instinct of a mother's heart and watch her only child give himself completely to the work of God. No triumphalism here. Patience, perseverance, courage, faith.

Or maybe we'll want to remember Clare of Assisi. Back in the thirteenth century she was an 18-year old. She just innocently went to church one day. She listened to a very powerful young new preacher named Francis and her life was turned upside down by a Gospel. And she, a young woman of wealth and privilege whose family was depending upon her for a advantageous marriage, alliance to protect power and privilege and place, Clare turned away from it all and became the mother of the poor. The mother of the poor Clare, she started her convent, her order of religious women who devoted their lives to the poor, the sick, the destitute. She turned against the wishes of the prevailing community and her family to follow her Lord.

Or we may want to remember who sits among the cloud of witnesses, David Pendleton Oakerhater. The young Oakerhater was a member of the Cheyenne tribe in the Oklahoma territories. He and other Indians actually fought against the U.S. Federal Army in trying to protect their lands from what they perceived of as an invasion. He was arrested. He was imprisoned in Florida. And an Army chaplain took David under wing, brought him the Gospel, he converted to Christianity and returned as an ordained deacon to Oklahoma to preach the Good News. He was a warrior for God. He stood up for Jesus and went into a battle for hearts and minds for the prince of peace and ministered among the tribes of Oklahoma for 50 years.

Is this the kind of community that nurtures that kind of faithfulness? Do we stop to reflect upon the fact that this cloud of witnesses is cheering us on, urging us on? That we are surrounded by such a faithful community to give us the power to find the courage and the compassion and the perseverance to follow Jesus? What does it look like to follow Jesus? When we follow Jesus we make our way through tangled messes and we look at what shapes our decisions. We are not a church of absolute answers, we are a church of character that shapes us at critical times. And we ask ourselves as this church, as this community of saints, are our decisions characterized by love of neighbor or fear of the strangers? Are our decisions characterized by nursing a sense of resentment and anger or by cultivating an attitude of gratefulness and forgiveness? Are our decisions characterized about a sense of hopefulness for the reign of God or are we more interested in shaping our decisions by what will put our needs ahead of those of others? Are our

decisions based on what is the safe bet or what it is to be faithful to God? Are our decisions based upon what is convenient for us in the moment or for what is good for the whole earth and all her creatures in the long run? Are our decisions based upon on a vision of justice for all or upon fear that there might not be enough for me?

We need a community that makes us think. We need a community that lets us ask hard questions like, what does it look like today to be faithful? We need a community that doesn't pretend to have all public policy answers, but a community that promises to practice truth telling, forgiveness, hospitality to all, compassion for all. If you and I have decided to follow Jesus, to stand up for Jesus, to understand that there are battles worth fighting for, to understand that what happened to us at baptism was not a nice party, but a life-changing commitment, if we have decided to follow Jesus, we'll just have to take the irritations, the setbacks, the disappointments and even the suffering that comes along the way. But we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. And as you look around this room, you are surrounded by so great a community of character that we will know a joy of that race that transcends any pain or suffering of the present time.

Let us pray. Gracious Lord, help us to set aside our fears and follow you in hope. Give us courage to turn away from a world offering false promises of success and help us turn to your kingdom that promises to welcome all sinners and all saints. Bless us with compassion to seek and serve our companions on the way revealing neighbors where we might suspect enemies. And above all, Almighty God, continue to bless us with the communion of saints who surround us with love and join our voices to theirs in offering you praise and thanksgiving forever and ever. Amen.