

INVITED TO TAKE A STAND

Luke 13:31-35
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Community Church, Congregational
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My clergy colleague Maria has always been a good preacher, but only in recent years has she really found her courage to put herself out there when she preaches. A few years ago, she said to me, “I’m bored with myself after 25 years of preaching.” But now, she loves preaching again, because she’s started telling more of her own stories. She connects her rich theology and deep spirituality with the daily life she leads in the messages she crafts, and her church on the central coast love it! Maria’s always been a theological preacher, a spiritual teacher. I don’t think I’ve ever known her to preach a prophetic sermon or talk about social justice or even make a demand in her sermons, as some preachers do. So imagine my surprise last week when she sent me a copy of her sermon on Friday before preaching it, and said, “I cannot be silent in the face of all this Methodist stupidity!” I opened up the document and was just astounded at her courage. She had taken a stand, strong and clear, that her leadership would be fully inclusive, no matter what the United Methodist votes may have been at their recent General Conference that decided exclusion of gays and lesbians was their rule and they were going to follow it. Maria stated loud and clear to her Methodist Church that this rule of exclusion was not going to be the rule of their beach town church. She preached about John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and his theology of reaching out to the outcasts of 18th century English society and embracing them fully in the grace of God. She preached about how Wesley taught his followers to welcome everyone – rich, poor, white, black, society leaders, prostitutes, magistrates, and prisoner – all welcome in the church; all encouraged to become faithful disciples and even leaders as they grew in their faith. It was as if Maria was saying to her lifelong denomination, “Go and tell that old fox that *“Invited to Take a Stand” ~ Luke 13:31-35 © 2019 Mary Scifres ~ www.maryscifres.com*

we have a calling to pursue that includes everyone, and nothing is going to stop me from helping my church to answer that call!”

When the Pharisees warned Jesus that traveling to Jerusalem might get him killed, Jesus refused to be stopped. He had a purpose to fulfill, a message to preach, and Jerusalem was a critical part of that purpose and that message. “Herod wants to kill me? You tell that old fox that I have a calling to pursue that includes Jerusalem, and nothing is going to stop me from answering that call.” Jesus referred to the demons he’s been facing down and casting out, a reminder that Herod is nothing in the face of powers as strong as demonic forces. He spoke of the miraculous healings he’d been performing, despite Sabbath restrictions and purity laws, offering his ministry any place it was needed, and every place the Spirit called him to go, regardless of who he offended, what dangers he faced, or what rules he had to break. After all that, the Pharisees think he’s afraid of Herod? “Go and tell that fox for me that I can’t be stopped. I won’t be stopped!” Jesus is on a journey to the cross, and he knows it, and he travels the journey anyway. If you know the rest of the story, you know that Jesus will get to Jerusalem and no sooner will he get there, then he’ll be turning over tables in the temple and causing all kinds of uproar. Jesus was not a wimpy guy, and he never intended for his followers to be wimpy either. We are called to be brave. We’re called to take a stand. We’re meant to be strong and steadfast in our faithfulness.

Sometimes, Christians get confused about this. We somehow think that being a people of love means being “nice.” But love isn’t always nice. Love is strong. Love is brave. Love is steadfast and faithful. And that’s who we’re called to be. People of love. People of strong love.

But sometimes, fear gets in our way. We might be afraid of offending someone. We might be afraid of making the wrong decision. We might be afraid we’re not good enough. We
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might be afraid we're not faithful enough. We might be afraid we don't know enough. But to all that fear, Jesus enters in and says, "Go and tell that fox that you've got a purpose to fulfill, and nothing's going to stop you." My friends, fear is a fox more dangerous and treacherous than King Herod or any human being could ever be. Fear holds us back. Fear pushes us down. Fear blocks us from hearing the Spirit's call. Fear tries to confuse us with other voices, other messages. Fear is not of God; fear is of the "other one." In *Star Wars* terms, fear is the "dark side."

The Psalmist knew this. King David is probably the Psalmist who was facing great danger, even fear, when he wrote "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" God will hide me in shelter in the day of trouble, conceal me under cover of God's tent or set me high on a rock to protect me." Even when facing fear, it's important to take and stand and remember that God is standing with us. When facing fear, hold fast to God, rest in the strength of God's love, for God's love is strong enough to cast out fear.

Let's be like Jesus. Let's face our fears head on. Let's take a stand when we need to take a stand. Let's be brave when we know we're called to do something. Let's find our courage to answer the Spirit's call steadfastly and faithfully. And when we can't find the courage on our own, that's okay. We can just lean on the strength of Christ's love. Bond with the Spirit's presence in our lives, and let God's courage be strong enough to overcome our fears. When fear comes lurking around, go and tell that old fox to get out of your way. When fear comes lurking around, remember all the good you've already done in this world, all the healing prayers and love you've helped people with, all the teaching and learning you've shared with others, all the times when you've made the world a little bit better. Remember those good things. We all have them. Remember your goodness. We all have that within us. And then, say to fear, "Fear, you *"Invited to Take a Stand"* ~ Luke 13:31-35 © 2019 Mary Scifres ~ www.maryscifres.com

old fox, get out of my way. I've got work to do." The Spirit is leading each and every one of us to move forward, not to shy away. God is calling each and every one of us. Don't you want to answer that call? The world needs you, the world needs me, the world needs us, and we want to be there for the world.

Remember how I told you a couple of weeks ago I would invite you to add things in this Lenten season in preparation for Easter, rather than giving things up? Today, I invite to add in courage. Invite God's courage to help you face fear head on. "Go and tell fear, that old fox, that you have places where God wants you to go and things that God wants you to do."

Where is fear holding you back? Where is fear trying to talk you down and turn you backward? Where are you forgetting that God is your light and salvation, your fortress and your strength? Are you afraid to stand up to a boss who isn't being ethical and is roping you into the gray areas you know are wrong? Are you afraid to let go of control and surrender to God? Are you afraid to trust in others to do their part? Are you afraid that if you do that, everything will fall apart without you or it won't go exactly your way? Are you afraid to talk openly with your spouse about changes you're going through or worries you're facing? Are you afraid to be honest in your parenting, to be strong enough to really help your kids grow and develop in the loving, healthy, courageous ways you would have them go?

Where is fear holding you back? Are you afraid to answer God's call, even though you know exactly what God's Spirit is yearning for you to do? Are you afraid you're not important enough to talk with God, so you're avoiding prayer? Are you afraid that if you don't do every little thing perfectly that you won't measure up? Are you afraid that the world is such a scary mess that you're just burying your head in the sand instead of taking a stand? Are there Pharisees in your life who are telling you to be afraid? Where is fearing holding you back?

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We all face fears. Even Jesus faced fears. We all face enemies like King Herod, who would do us harm. We all face misleading voices, like the Pharisees, voices of people around us or voices in our heads, who would tell us, “Don’t go where God’s calling you to go, for that’s a dangerous path.” In the midst of those voices, God invites us to take in a stand. In the face of those fears, Christ is with us, strengthening us for the journey, a journey Jesus knew well, for he walked it, just as we walk it. To those voices, to those fears, even to those people, God invites us to take a stand and say, “You old fox, I’m not going to let fear guide me. I’ve got places to go and things to do. The world needs me to be brave. God needs me to be faithful. I’m going where the Spirit leads me to go, no matter what.” We can go there, scary as it may be, because God goes before us – our light and our salvation. We can answer God’s call, scary as it may be, because God goes with us, our shelter and our protector.

Think about those places and times where fear haunts you, where fear holds you back, where fear keeps you from following where the Spirit is leading....

Then imagine Jesus right beside you in the face of that fear. Jesus stands up strong and tall, puts a hand on your shoulder and whispers, “You’re invited to take stand; you’re invited to stand up to fear. And I will be right here the whole time.”

With Jesus at your side, what will you say to that fear?

Next time fear comes lurking around, I’m going to say, “Get behind me, you old fox.” With the brave words of Jesus ringing in my ears, I’m going to trust that Jesus is with me, and even if I can’t stand as straight and tall and brave as I’d like to, that ‘s okay. Jesus can hold me
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up if I start to fall; the Spirit can be my courage if I start to fade. Envision it. We are not alone when we decide to take a stand. We are not alone when we need to find our courage. We are not alone when we're called to go and serve and love and do. God's Spirit is with us. The Spirit is in us. The Spirit is all around us, just as the Spirit was with Jesus, in Jesus, and all around Jesus. The Spirit is here, always and everywhere, inviting us to take a stand for love and goodness and mercy and grace and justice and peace and inclusion.

When the Methodists voted last month to exclude gays and lesbians from leadership in the church and to prohibit pastors from performing their weddings and blessing their calls to ministry, my friend Maria couldn't abide with that Pharisaic decision. And so she preached about the decision as a return to the rule of law that Jesus spent his entire life overturning and re-inventing, so that love would be the only rule that guides us. She texted me after her first worship service that morning, "Two people walked out! Do I still preach the sermon at second service? Oh, Lord!" she said in her text, "I have to preach it, I'm called to preach it, pray for me." That afternoon, she texted me again, "Second service stood and applauded. Afterwards, several people thanked me and told me stories of their children and grandchildren who'd been excluded and yearned to be included. Thank God I found my courage to preach that message of inclusion at both services."

God invites each of us to take a stand in different ways at different times in different places; but always God invites us to take a stand against fear. For fear is never of God; and God's love is strong enough to cast out our fears and empower us with the Spirit to go where we are called to go, say what we are called to say, and do what we are called to do. May God's love guide our steps, even when it means stomping out fear so we can continue to move forward in faith and love.

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