

**March 17, 2019**

**TEXT: Luke 13:31–35**

**TITLE: Faith + Justice**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

If I asked you to picture the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ in your mind, what images would come to mind? Maybe you imagine Jesus standing before a large crowd teaching them about God’s love. Maybe you picture Jesus blessing a group of children, saying “of such as these is the Kingdom of God.” Maybe you see him healing a leper or comforting Mary and Martha after the death of their brother Lazarus. We are drawn to these images because we too want to learn from a wise Jesus, or be healed and comforted by a loving Jesus.

But if you widen the frame of your mental image more, you will notice that every loving, healing, teaching act of Jesus also caused someone in the crowd to become uncomfortable. Jesus healed a man who was mute, and while most were amazed, others began to mutter that only someone serving the devil could cast out demons like this. Jesus saw a man up in a sycamore tree, called him down and said that he’d have a meal at his house—which led many to mutter that Jesus had poor judgment, since that man was Zacchaeus, a tax collector and traitor who served the Roman oppressors. Jesus re-interpreted the scripture, telling people “You have heard it said...but I say to you,” which caused teachers listening from the margins to murmur against this upstart Jesus who dared challenge their authority about what God’s law calls us to say and do.

Jesus was a change agent and change agents invariably upset people. Like my mother used to say, “If you want to make an omelet, you gotta break some eggs.” If you keep things just as they are, you’ll never get to where you want to be. To bring about positive change, you have to challenge the status quo—confronting the powers that be and push back against the mindset that says “don’t rock the boat.” This is true in our individual lives—when the time comes to confront an abuser or to name something wrong that’s happening at work. It is also true in our common lives—when we say “no more” after another mass shooting claims innocent lives, after another legislative session does nothing about abolishing capital punishment or reducing the national debt or protecting this land’s resources for the sake of our children. Yet remember this: as soon as you start breaking those eggs or rocking the boat, someone from the margins is likely going to move close to you and whisper in your ear that you’d better change your tune or you’re going to be in trouble.

Jesus experienced this a lot, as today’s scripture passage reminds us. Jesus was drawing big enough crowds that Herod had taken notice of him. Herod was a provincial governor appointed by the Roman emperor and charged with keeping the peace in the backwater territory called Palestine. Herod was a calculating politician, anxious to hold onto power and privilege at any cost. He once made a bad boast at a party and ended up having John the Baptist’s head cut off so as to not lose face. And now someone more popular than John the Baptist was making headline news in Herod’s turf.

So one day, some religious officials sidled up to Jesus and basically said, “Friend, let me give you some advice. Herod wants to kill you, so you need to get out of town fast.” Now those who contend that Jesus never got mixed up in politics obviously haven’t read the New Testament. For example, Palm Sunday was not just a simple parade involving songs and palm branches. It was a defiant political act, with Jesus leading a march into the crowded capital city heavily guarded by Roman soldiers and ruled by nervous local politicians terrified of anyone who might disrupt the peace in Jerusalem.

Jesus was spiritual and religious, but he was also prophetic and political. He challenged the whisperers who warned him about Herod and called that nervous politician an old fox. He went on to defiantly insist that he would keep doing exactly what he’d been doing and Herod couldn’t deter, dissuade, or intimidate him now or ever. But here comes the interesting part. Right then, Jesus could have turned to the crowd and incited them with fiery rhetoric. He could have shouted, “Down with Herod! Down with Roman oppressors who take our wealth and defile our land!” We know how popular messages of hate and nationalism can win political points today. But that’s not what Jesus did. Instead, after calling Herod a fox, the next words Jesus spoke were a lament. Jesus wept over Jerusalem saying how much he desired to gather them under his wings, like a mother hen, protecting and nurturing them with a love that they sadly kept rejecting.

There’s something powerful in this juxtaposition of the political and the pastoral—of foxes and hens—that is critical for us to remember today. Jesus reminds us that no true change is possible without compassion. If you truly want to follow Christ, you have to speak the truth and show kindness to God’s children. Faith plus justice is a personal process that always focuses on actual human beings. Let me say more about this.

One of today’s most pressing issues in America involves our borders and how we treat people who come to this country seeking asylum. We don’t have any truly good answers for this problem. President Obama didn’t and President Trump certainly doesn’t. Frustrated by the complexity of this problem, we de-personalize the issue. Both sides toss around statistics, data and policy statements. Most of the stories about our border policies make for hard reading—young children, some literally less than a year old, torn from their parents’ arms and put in foster care halfway across the country; hundreds and hundreds of families camping out at border stations hoping to find legal asylum here, while others are driven to risky crossings through the Rio Grande’s waters.

But one story I read made me smile. In a former Walmart in Brownsville, Texas, 1500 migrant boys are being held by our government. The barriers in their sleeping quarters don’t reach to the ceiling, so sound travels far in this cavernous building. Bored, frightened, penned up like animals, the boys sometimes took refuge in silliness—and as bedtime came, some would start to moo like cattle. Others would take up the call and moo back, until the entire group would start laughing and for a moment simply be a bunch of silly kids in a crazy, messed up world.

That detail of mooing children humanized this topic for me. It let me remember that we’re talking about kids—kids taken from home, taken from parents, told not to

misbehave and not to cry, because that might hurt their case. Kids who write letters and hide them in their possessions, because they don't have mail privileges, much less even know where their parents are. Whatever answer needs to be found for our immigration policies, it needs to start by asking, "How are we treating the children—kids who want nothing more than to be with their family, to play and color and read and occasionally moo at their bedtime, just like every single kid in our life?"

If you look closely enough, every political issue has a human face to it. The arguments over abortion are not theoretical, for they always involve a young woman's troubled face as she ponders the hardest decision of her life. The recent presidential ban on transgender people serving in the military is not a bureaucratic policy issue when you actually listen to the stories of Captain Alivia Stehlik or Airman Sterling Crutcher about their active duty in Afghanistan. The debate over gun control is not some obtuse disagreement over constitutional interpretations once we focus on the tear-streaked face of Emma Gonzalez after Parkland, the stunned congregation members of Tree of Life gathering in our social hall the day after the synagogue shooting, the memory of Rev. Clementa Pickney's bible study just before Dylann Roof began killing folks in that AME church, or the fact that the last words spoken by the first victim in the recent New Zealand mosque shooting were "Welcome, brother."

Our faith moves us toward what is just and right and life-giving for all people. That means pushing back on what is unjust and just plain wrong, even if that upsets folks and challenges the political powers-that-be. Jesus is our guide for this, the Jesus who called Herod a fox and defied his attempts to shut down his ministry. But Jesus didn't linger over his anger or incite the mobs with loud cries of self-centered protests. Instead he called to mind the image of a hen and her flock. He pictured those whom God loved and ultimately those for whom Christ would die; and he wept, wishing they would come home—come together at last.

Faith alone has much value. It calls to mind the Jesus who healed, comforted, and showed loving-kindness during his earthly ministry. But in too many churches, faith alone fails to expand the picture of Jesus beyond images of a personalized Savior. Justice alone has much value. It motivates us to seek change in the world by challenging flawed policies, persistent prejudices, and racist white nationalism both here and around the world. But in too many ways, justice issues become shallow debates on social media provoking lots of agitation but little real change. "Faith + justice" is different because it names the foxes even as it calls us to discover our common humanity beneath the wings of our fiercely protective Mother God. "Faith + justice" listens to stories and knows there are children's lives at stake behind every headline. It knows that there are faces of pain around us that are looking at us to see if we are willing to return their gaze and act on what we see. "Faith + justice" knows that if you want to see to face of Jesus today, it is there in the faces of those seeking shelter beneath God's wings. Come, it's time for us to join them.