



Sermon, January 22, 2017
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Where Do We Go from Here?
“Counter-Cultural”

Opening Question: “At what times in history have people disobeyed governments or rulers in order to be faithful to higher standards or to their faith?”

Scripture:

Exodus 1:15-22 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶ “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” ¹⁹ The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” ²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

The Hebrew midwives and nonviolent non-cooperation/civil disobedience

What a horrible story! Who to you are the heroes (heroines) of this story? For me, the Hebrew midwives display what they call in Yiddish, *chutzpah*. This is one of the first examples in the Bible of what we would call today, civil disobedience or nonviolent non-cooperation with an unjust authority. Do you notice what propels the midwives not to cooperate with the order given them? (*Take responses*) what does the Bible say about them? “The midwives feared God.” (Some translations say, “respected God.) they had a higher call to live by.

Some stories

Glenn Olds

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Several years ago, the Rev. Dr. Glenn A. Olds spoke at our Annual Conference, and he is one of few Conference speakers whose stories I recall from over the years. What struck me and stuck with me was a story he told about standing up to a violent mob in 1942. Now, Dr. Olds had a very interesting life. He was born to the descendants of Irish immigrants who had settled in Sherwood, Oregon. Due to the generosity of someone, he was able to attend Willamette University in Salem, graduated and then attended Northwestern University and went on to get a Ph.D. at Yale University. During his career he served as president at Springfield College in Massachusetts, at Kent State in Ohio, and revived the moribund Alaska Methodist University. But Dr. Olds didn't talk about any of those achievements. Instead he related to us the necessity for Christians from time to time to take a stand for what is true, good and noble, in spite of what public sentiment might be.

He was a senior at Willamette and was working as a student pastor in one of the local churches in December 1942. On December 7, 1942, another local preacher had contacted Olds and asked him to come out to stand in the road to Lake Labish, a small Japanese-American farming enclave outside of Salem, because he feared that local citizens would seek retribution against the residents of Lake Labish. An article in the Summer 2003 issue of the Willamette Scene describes what happened:

“Suddenly, Olds and four other preachers were the only ones standing in the way of a hostile mob bent on revenge. ‘You could not believe it,’ says Olds, recounting that many men showed up armed with shovels, sticks and any weapon they could find, including guns.

“Before the mob could make a move, one of the four preachers standing with Olds stepped forward and confronted them. ‘What are you men doing?’ he asked. When the lead man responded, ‘We’re here to burn these Goddamn Japs out,’ the preacher countered, ‘What do you mean, these Japs?’ These are Americans, like you and me. Let me tell you, we come from an army that’s a lot older than yours; the army of Jesus Christ, who tried to put this kind of mentality out of circulation. We’re standing here and firm, and you’re going to have to walk over us to get to them.’

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The silent mob spent what felt like an eternity to Olds considering the man’s words. Finally, the mob leader spoke, “Hell, the preacher’s right. Let’s go back for another beer.” (Brad Millay, “Standing Firm,” *Willamette Scene*, Summer 2003, p. 21)

Exodus says that the Hebrew midwives respected (or feared) God and because of that they refused to cooperate with an official order instructing them to kill the newborn Hebrew boys. Glenn Olds and those other preachers could have given in to the prevailing sentiment across the country at that time, and stayed home, but they went and stood in the road, and stood up to the unreasoning anger of a mob. They also bore witness to their faith in Jesus Christ as one who had come to end such hatred, violence, bloodshed, and national and racial prejudice. They had a higher calling, a higher standard to live according to, and their action called those men to live according to it as well.

Over and over again, we find stories in the Bible and in human history where people of faith respond to the higher call that causes them to act counter to their culture, to act counter to what oppressive governments, unjust societies or bigoted cultures would tell them to do. For a minute or two, I’d like for us to discuss together What might be some of the things in our culture we might be called as people of faith to counteract.

Conversation around questions

- How are we *of* our culture,
- How much do we run *counter* to it,
- And, how do we try to change it?

Closing story of Nicolaikirche Peace Prayers

In 1996, I had the opportunity to travel and teach a class in Germany. During that travel, I visited friends in Leipzig, and one day we went downtown to visit the Nicolaikirche near the central square. This church, which had been built in 1165, had been at the center of nonviolent resistance to the Communist regime in East Germany. Let me tell the story in the words of Bonnie Block, a Lutheran pastor who visited in the early 1990s:

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The story actually begins in the late 1970s or early 1980s when there were huge demonstrations all over Europe to protest the arms race. But in East Germany there was no neutral space to discuss and reflect on public issues except for the churches. It was in this context that a youth group from a congregation in eastern Leipzig started "peace prayers" every Monday at 5 pm at the Nicolaikirche. Soon "Bausoldaten" (people who rendered their compulsory military service by serving in special, unarmed units) came, followed by environmental activists and people interested in third world issues. Together they tried to stir the public's conscience and encourage action.

That made the Stasi (State Security Police) and SED (the ruling Communist Party) officials come to see what was going on. Soon applicants for emigration and other regime critics came – along with Christian and non-Christian citizens of Leipzig and other parts of East Germany. The government reacted. From the May 8 1989, the access roads to the Nicolaikirche were checked and blocked by the police. Later the autobahn exits to Leipzig were subject to large-scale checks or even closed during the time of the prayers for peace. Monday after Monday there were arrests or "temporary detentions." Yet the people continued to gather.

By September, the 2000 seats in the church were filled and people coming out of the church were joined by tens of thousands waiting in the Square outside. All held lighted candles in their hands and slowly they began to move toward the ring road that surrounds the city center. Helmut Junghans, a retired professor at the University of Leipzig said: "It started with 5 or 6 but each week there were more of us praying for peace. Eventually we filled the church and then the square around the church and then we spilled onto the ring road surrounding the old part of Leipzig. Eventually there were 300,000 of us marching past the Stasi headquarters. Chants of 'We are the people' began and then soon changed to 'We are one people.' But there was not one broken shop window and there was no violence."

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October 7, 1989 was the 40th anniversary of the GDR. The authorities cracked down and for ten long hours uniformed police battered defenseless people who made no attempt to fight back and took them away in trucks. Hundreds were locked up in stables in Markkleeberg. The press published an article saying it was high time to put an end to the "counter-revolution," if need be, by force.

On Monday, October 9, 1989 "everything was at stake" because the order to shoot the protesters had been given. Rev. Christian Fuhrer, describes the day as follows:

1,000 SED party members had been ordered to go to the Nicholaikirche. Some 600 of them had already filled up the church nave by 2 pm. They had a job to perform like the Stasi personnel who were on hand regularly and in great numbers at the peace prayers. And so it was that these people, including SED party members, heard from Jesus who said: "Blessed are the poor"! And not: "Anyone with money is happy."

Jesus said: "Love your enemies"! Instead of: "Down with your opponent." Jesus said: "Many who are first will be last"! And not: "Everything stays the same." Jesus said: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it"! And not: "Take great care." Jesus said: "You are the salt"! And not: "You are the cream."

The prayers for peace took place in unbelievable calm and concentration. Shortly before the end, before the bishop gave his blessing, appeals by Professor Masur, chief conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra, and others who supported our call for non-violence, were read out. This mutuality in such a threatening situation is also important, this solidarity between church and art, music and gospel. And so these prayers for peace ended with the bishop's blessing and the urgent call for non-violence. And as we—more than 2,000 persons—came out of the church—I'll never forget the sight—tens of thousands were waiting outside in the Square. They all had candles in their hands. If you carry a candle, you need two hands. You have to prevent the candle

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from going out. You cannot hold a stone or a club in your hand. And the miracle came to pass. Jesus' spirit of nonviolence seized the masses and became a material, peaceful power. Troops, industrial militia groups, and the police were drawn in, became engaged in conversations, then withdrew. It was an evening in the spirit of our Lord Jesus for there were no victors or vanquished, no one triumphed over the other, and no one lost face.

Not a shot was fired. On Monday, October 16, the peace prayers continued (as they do to this day) and 120,000 people were in the streets of Leipzig demanding democracy and free elections. On October 18, Erich Honecker, the leader of the ruling SED party resigned.

Nonviolent protests were held all over Germany, including one with one half million people in East Berlin on November 4th. On November 7, 1989 the entire government of the GDR resigned. On November 9th the crossing points of the Wall in East Berlin opened. Seven months later the entire border regime of the GDR (symbolized by Checkpoint Charlie) came to an end. On October 3, 1990 Germany was reunified.

Sindermann, who was a member of the Central Committee of the GDR, said before his death: "We had planned everything. We were prepared for everything. But not for candles and prayers."

This is the power of our faith. This is the higher calling to which we are called. If the time comes and we are called, may we learn from the Hebrew midwives.