

“A New Kind of Security”

John 10:22-39

May 5th, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

It was in the winter months during the holidays when Jesus was walking along the porch of the temple. The open corridor skirted the so called “court of the Gentiles” and the rows of pillars testified to the grandeur of Judaism as it was remembered in Solomon’s days. There was a bit of seasonal cheer in the air because it was Hanukkah, the feast of the dedication of the temple. Some called it the “Festival of Lights” because of the legend about the day’s worth of lamp oil that miraculously burned for eight days. Tradition was solidly in place.

Those who could remember their history were telling their children and grandchildren about the holidays. Perhaps as Jesus walked along the porch, He could see posters and crafts the children had made in their Synagogue classes.

Only two generations before this, the Syrian King Antiochus had threatened the very life of Judaism. He killed over 80,000 people and sold as many into slavery. He helped himself to millions of dollars from the Temple treasury.

Antiochus made it a capital offense to possess the scriptures and he crucified Jewish women who circumcised their infants hanging their murdered children around their necks as they were dying on the cross. He turned the temple meeting rooms into prostitute’s chambers and sacrificed pigs to Zeus on the great altar. And it was because of these atrocities that Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers responded in their epic fight for freedom in 164 B.C.E.

The Maccabean rebellion was a bright spot in Jewish history because for a time, they were able to rise up against those who harshly governed them and they won. Of course they made a great tradition around the event of cleansing and rededicating the temple and these ceremonies commemorating these events were being carried out that week.

A handful of people came up to Jesus and said: “All right, this is Your chance. Are You going to tell us You are the Messiah or not?”

And Jesus responded to them as abruptly as they had approached him. “I told you before but you wouldn’t listen” He said. “If you’ve seen Me, you’ve seen God. Take it or leave it.”

And with that, some started screaming while others went over into the adjacent court yard and picked up rocks and patio tiles. They were going to do away with this blaspheming lunatic once and for all.

Amidst the loud talk and commotion, Jesus could be heard to say: “What are you getting all excited about? Even in the Psalms, God said to the judges of Israel: ‘I said, You are gods and all of you are sons of the Most High.’¹ What are you going to do with that nice little section of Scripture?”

The ones holding rocks dropped them as they watched the sudden quieting of the religious leaders closer to Jesus. If they couldn’t beat Him up or stone Him, they were at least going to call for His arrest. Yes, He was smart and would have to be handled properly.

“Look at the what I have been doing” Jesus said. “Look at the results in the lives of the people. Judge by actions, rather than judge it simply because it is something different than what you have heard before.”

“And besides,” Jesus continued, “you judge a person by their actions. What is it about what I do with My life that is such a problem? Who would like to step forward and speak first?”

As the murmuring increased and with the crowd beginning to argue among themselves, Jesus slipped out of the corridor and walked on His way.



¹ Psalm 82:6

There were two reasons why Jesus put those people off. The first was that they simply did not want to believe in Him. They were looking for a controversy and these religious leaders were already so threatened by His healing a man who had been born blind, that they were beside themselves with anger and frustration.

The reason Jesus did not say: “Oh, all right, I’ll make it official: I’m the Messiah” was because the terms “Christ” and “Messiah” were not adequate in identifying Who He was. These words had been shaped and molded by their culture’s expectations and it was hard for Jesus to say “yes” to that question without stirring up false hopes in a political solution to their Roman captivity. Their expectations were distorted so the first thing Jesus had to do was to get the people to stop looking for their political Messiah.

Jesus was not just the Messiah of Judaism. He was the presence of God in humanity and that was too profound for those people in that crowd who were already riddled with enough anger to cause physical injury and even death. Do we really think Jesus was going to dignify these knuckleheads with a serious answer that they wouldn’t have taken seriously anyway?

Some of these people had been enraged that He had healed a crippled man on the Sabbath and their own callousness had made them blind to the good that was happening in their midst. The next time you see an ethical issue being discussed among Christians, watch how some people throw themselves into the debate. Ask yourself, is this speaker driven and consumed by anger or do they embody compassion and empathy for those who are being identified as the oppressed?

These religious leaders were so foolish and arrogant that they missed the actual appearance of God in their life. What more could they have wanted? It’s not as if Jesus was some subversive Who was organizing an underground army of violent people. It was not as if Jesus was selling cocaine on the street and massing a fortune in order to influence and later overthrow those in power.

Jesus was living in relative poverty, traveling from suburb to suburb as He taught – making people feel as if they had a purpose for living and performing beautiful and breathtaking acts of healing. “I knew that man who was healed” someone would say.

“He sat by the market gate for years all crippled up and Jesus healed him. My gosh, the man is now living next to me in an apartment and I see him on the street and he laughs like a kid and dances until he falls over with exhaustion. This Jesus is no fake. He actually is doing these *spectacular* things.”

No matter what Jesus did, there were those in the religious establishment who simply would not believe. They would not have recognized and accepted the truth if it bit them in the nose.

So why were they all bent out of shape about Jesus? Why didn’t they just call Him a charlatan or some fanatic and ignore Him? It’s not as if Jesus was going around from door to door, asking people to join a cult and give Him their social security checks.

You do not get angry at people about whom you don’t care. If someone doesn’t make any difference to you, you don’t care. You only get angry when you care. These religious leaders did care because Jesus was threatening their sense of security through the authority people ascribed to them because of their career position in that society. Jesus threatened the very thing that they deemed necessary for securing meaning in life.

You see, traditionally, to be right with God, you had to do “the right things.” If you followed the laws, kept up with the interpretations on how to follow the laws, kept up on the new laws and occasionally risked your life to keep the temple cult in tact (and all of its symbolism), God would bless you and all your children and your children’s children and kick your enemies in the shins.

The entire focus of traditional religion had been a *conditional* relationship with God. “God will love you IF.” And one of the reasons these people were fit to be tied was Jesus said that to see Him was to see God.

“You blasphemer” they self-righteously screamed at the top of their lungs when Jesus told them of His intimate oneness with the Creator. They were so tightly wound with their rhetoric about religion and their use of all the right words and about judging someone as “sound” or “doctrinally true” that when the real thing showed up, they went to work with their shrewd religious microscopes of judgment and missed the very presence of God. Their short-sightedness was almost humorous.

At least Jesus had a sense of humor in throwing back at them an unusual text in Psalms about God calling people “gods” spelled with a small “g.” For various reasons, these angry people cared about Jesus enough to take him seriously and because they did, they were tremendously threatened.



The second reason they were angry was because they were being asked to give something up. They had placed their emotional and psychological security in their familiarity with and their control of their religion of fear. If this tit-for-tat judgmental-‘God-is-going-to-get-you-unless-you-do-exactly-what-we-teach-you-to-believe’ religion were to be judged by those who regularly pledged to their offering plates, they’d lose everything and their PhD’s, with a dollar, would only get them coffee. Their entire religious scheme of rewards and punishments was based on an a controlling emotional security of conditional acceptance before God. Jesus had come along and with great articulation, taught them to give up that religion of fear and find their security in God, not in a contrived person-made-hierarchical-organized religion.

In order to learn, we have to give something up. In order to receive, sometimes we have to let go of something.



All of us, in our own ways, devise ways of shoring up our sense of security. We place our trust in a host of things to establish a sense of security. And while Jesus seemed to threaten their

sense of religious security, they had a number of other fears as we all do.

When I was in elementary school there was a monster who lived under my bed at night. This fiend would come out of hiding only when my parents were down stairs and out of ear shot. This phantom would sit under my bed, waiting for me to put foot out over the edge. And if my foot would ever hit the floor, I was sure he would viciously grab my ankle, break it, break my knee off and then drag the rest of me (still attached to these broken bones) under the bed and break the rest of me.

This is what I supposed would happen but it never happened because I never let any part of me outside of the covers without getting my parents upstairs first. “Mom” I would call, “would you come upstairs for a minute?” And when she got up, I would ask: “May I go to the bathroom?” And as many times as she told me that I didn’t have to ask permission to go, I never told her that the real reason I got her, or my dad, upstairs was because whenever they came up, the monster would have to stay hidden under the bad.

In those days of my youth, Captain Kangaroo and Fred Rogers never dealt with this problem and neither did Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, Pat Brady or his jeep Nellie Belle. I never did stop to ask the reason why Dale Evans had a different last name than Roy but one year the monster went away, probably because it got bored because I never left bed unless I had parental protection.

By the time I got into high school, I was occasionally encouraged by my successes but there was always the fear of the future that followed me down the hallway to my locker. I thought that once I graduated, I will disappear into the crowd of faceless adults and be like everyone else – but things, for me, might not work out.

I was afraid that college will be too hard and I’d flunk out. The military, certainly, would unmask me as a coward. Back in high school, I worried that my future marriage would turn sour and that love would die. And as they sang some “dippy” song at our high school graduation, I was afraid that in one way or another, I would find

disgrace, as others had.² That I won't be able to "climb every mountain" or "hitch my wagon to a star and ride" as the valedictorian pertly chimed at our graduation ceremony.

These kinds of fears are a powerful reason why we see middle and high school young people walking down the street wearing *exactly* the same kind of clothing as those around them. They want to belong and be accepted by their peers, because perhaps this may be the only thing that ever works right for them again – *getting the clothing thing right*.



But even for those angry adults around Jesus, in that portico of the temple, fear was *dominating* their lives. They had gone to the temple every Sabbath all their lives and without fail. They had taught their children their own religious fears and insisted that they follow the strict traditions in their footsteps. But beneath the surface of these pious people was the most powerful fear and it was a fear that lurks in all of our lives. For those people it was the fear that their faith might not turn out to matter at all.

You see, they had lived out the years of their lives in the shadow of the *conditional* acceptance they had with God. IF they lived according to what the rabbis told them, IF they conformed to all of the visible evidences that they were devout in their religion, IF . . . THEN they could be assured that God must love them. And just to reinforce their assurance of God's acceptance, they verbalized what they were told must be God's rejection of people who didn't jump through all of the religious hoops that they had. And the more insecure they felt about the enormous religious trappings they accumulated in their visible life, the more they persecuted those who did not. (Remember how Paul the Pharisee started out persecuting – killing – the first Christians like Stephen.) So when Jesus came along and said what they inwardly wondered but didn't dare verbalize, it unmasked their deepest fears.

² See Garison Kehler's *Lake Woebegone*, p.295

Jesus was declaring that there is a different place to find their security – a different way apart from conformity to the stringent laws and cultic ceremonies and the established authority figures. He was healing those who were crippled and maimed and the social outcasts who thumbed their noses at the highly respected Priests and Pharisees. Jesus was teaching that God loved people and that this love was not dependent upon the dead animal carcasses piling up on the temple altars – nor the elegant chants of the clergymen on the street corner. And every time the religious establishment harshly judged one of their flock for not living up to *their* standards, Jesus said they were trying to make them 'twice as fit for hell as they were themselves.'

But within those angry people was a voice that was saying: "Maybe He's right. Maybe all this external religious hoop-de-la doesn't really matter. Perhaps we have been deceived all our lives and maybe it is so much simpler than we were lead to believe. Maybe, after all, God loves us like we love our own children – unconditionally."

But that voice was squelched and their fears arose and they reasoned, "If we have been wrong all these years, if all this work to be religious enough has been to no avail, then what is it all about? Then our faith doesn't matter." And with all of that threatened and when the way they defined their own self worth and identity was threatened, they became enraged and their fragile world appeared to be on the verge of collapse. For this reason, they picked up rocks and almost became crazy people, that morning. Ironically, they had started off the day after breakfast and decided to go to the temple to pray.

The most powerful thing that Jesus taught was that we have a new basis for finding inner security. We can live without fear of disappearing into the crowd of faceless adults and live out our lives without meaning. Jesus was trying to teach us that God passionately loves us and although there are times when life becomes monotonous and there are times when our metabolism is running low and our aches and pains and lack of

goals runs us through depression, . . . despite all that – God loves us unconditionally. And if we have to have some sort of condition attached to it, the only condition is that we accept the free gift of God’s love and do the same with others – plain and simple.



So I turn to you, this morning, and ask you to judge. Look at the part of the Christian Church that demands that you conform to all of the lists of dos and don’ts. Are those people the kind of folks you want to be with – so tightly wound and fearful, wrapped in their facade of appearances and their fearful conditional religion of being good enough? Or do you see more security in the faith of those who affirm the love and acceptance of God – those who quietly are helping others look for the good and affirm their worth?

You don’t have to be fearful because whatever you choose to do, you’re doing the best you can and God loves you. Whatever your temperament is, whether it is bold and ambitious or quiet and sanguine – your responses to the gaiety or harshness of life are just the colors you give to the world’s canvas. Life is good and there is a lot of enjoyment to be had and a lot of challenges – some triumphs and some failures. But in all that, you are accepted. You are deeply loved by God. Similar to how we are fascinated by the innovative and delightful approach which children have to life, God is following your life and is delighted by your humor, your creativity and your passion for what you do.

So don’t look in the outward traditions for your security. Find your peace and security in knowing that God loves you, just as you are, as irreverent as you are, as devout and faithful as you are. There is no other security like it and if this truth doesn’t make you mad, it will set you free. 🐼

For your continued reading . . .

“Somersault”

Not to rebel against what pulls us down,
The private burdens each of us could name
That weigh heavily in the blood and bone
So that we stumble, clumsy half the time
Unable to love well or love at all!
Who knows the full weight that another bears,
What obscure densities sustains alone,
To burst fearfully through what self-locked
doors?
So heavy is our walk with what we feel,
And cannot tell, and cannot ever tell.

Oh, to have the lightness, the savoir faire
Of a tightrope walker, his quicksilver tread
As he runs softly over the taut steel thread;
Sharp as a knife blade cutting walls of air,
He’s pitted against weights we cannot see,
All tension balanced, though we see him only
A rapture of grace and skill, focused and
lonely.

Is it a question of discipline or grace?
The steel trap of the will or some slight shift
Within an opened consciousness?
The tightrope walker juggles weights, to lift
Himself up on the stress, and, airy master
Of his own loss, he springs from heaviness.
But we, stumbling our way, how learn such
poise,
The perfect balance of all griefs and joys?
Burdened by love, how learn the light release
That, out of stress, can somersault to peace?”
. . . May Sarton³



³ Collected Poems(1930-1973) page 181 ISBN 0-393-04386-X