

On my way to church I pass by a yard sign on the corner of 75th and Main at St. Elizabeth's that reads, "Want to know more about the Catholic faith?" and then a telephone number. I have been thinking about what a sign on our corner might read: "Not sure about Jesus? Neither are we, but we're trying to follow him anyway."

I find myself being less sure of what to say about who Jesus is—and less interested in nailing down a definition of who he is—and more sure and more interested in following him. I also believe in the resurrected Christ, and in the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. I just no longer know if it is essential for everyone to believe that. I know it has been essential for me. I have chosen to frame my life within the parameters of following Jesus, and trusting that somehow, in some way, he is helping me do that following.

Following Jesus is harder than I thought. Fortunately, the very following of Jesus contains the means of transformation that equips and enables us to... follow Jesus. Following Jesus means paying attention to how we behave in our relationships. It means paying attention to how we spend ourselves, how we use our time, our money, and our efforts. Because we are human beings, we often behave out of assumptions and motives which are hidden to us. We are very good at distorting reality to support our version of how things are. This can affect how we understand what it means to follow Jesus.

I recently took part in a retreat for spiritual formation. As part of the week, we were assigned to a small group for reflection exercises and discussion. One of our reflection questions was to think about what our hidden contract was with God. This is the contract out of our awareness we make with God or with life when we are very young. This contract affects our relationships and eventually our ministry. My initial contract with God was that I would be good, be nice, stay out of trouble and cause no trouble, and then God would love me and give me a happy life. How I got along in the world was by not making a mess, and by not making anyone mad.

I began to consider that this might be a distortion when, a few years ago, I noticed that the picture of the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels was not one of a "nice" person who stayed out of trouble and caused no trouble. His game plan didn't involve "getting along" and going out of his way to not make people angry. I thought being nice, giving in and keeping everyone happy was following Jesus. It was probably more about pleasing parents. You can see how pleasing people could keep one from being able to tell truth. I always had to weigh if the truth would make someone displeased with me.

To be serious about following Jesus, I had to make some changes. I started by trying to increase the level of integrity in my life. I started telling the truth instead of lying or keeping silent to avoid getting into trouble. At the very least I started to pay attention to when and why I lied. Besides lying to keep out of trouble, I lied to preserve an image of being good, or of being nice. I lied out of a fear of being judged and found wanting.

This path of following Jesus has become one of getting free of fear and judgment. It has been a slow work, and it is a continuing work, but along the way I have been discovering a new level of freedom to love, to be present, to create, to speak up and be seen, and to occasionally run the risk of making a mess. What has been surprising is the discovery of power—the power of love, the power of presence, the power of creativity, the power of speaking up.

I knew God was powerful, and I knew there was the power of the Holy Spirit, but I never imagined that power, personal power, would be part of following Jesus. In my mind, power was dangerous because power can be misused to hurt people. Power and violence lie too close together. We often define power by the amount of violence one can do to get one's way. I

wanted to stay away from violence—it was dangerous—and in doing so also looked on power with suspicion. In my fearfulness, I thought of nonviolence as a safe place to be—one that would keep me out of trouble and out of harm's way. I thought this even in the face of Jesus getting killed, Gandhi getting killed, and Martin Luther King, Jr. getting killed. Apparently embracing nonviolence does not keep you safe. It has taken getting free of some of my fear to bring me to the place where I can even consider: 1) war, terror, torture, and violence; 2) our government's policies with a critical eye; and 3) a sense of my own power and the responsibility I have to exercise it. Only recently have I thought of nonviolence not as a hiding place but as a powerful position, and one that demands courage and self awareness.

When I started thinking about what to say in a sermon, I read through the lectionary readings for today. The passage we heard read earlier, 2 Samuel, the 12th chapter, was one of those readings. As I considered this story of David and Nathan, I began to think about speaking truth to power and what it takes to do that.

Earlier in this passage, David was up on his roof and happened to see Bathsheba bathing. He desired her, called for her and they slept together. I suppose that would have been that, except that Bathsheba sent word to David that she was pregnant. David devised a plan to bring her husband, Uriah, back home from the war, to spend the night with his wife, to cover up the fact that Bathsheba was pregnant by David and not Uriah. Uriah kept himself from his wife because it wasn't honorable to have sexual relations while one's comrades were in battle. David even got Uriah drunk, hoping he would forget himself, but he didn't. When this cover-up plan failed, David came up with a new plan—this time one that got rid of Uriah and let David take Bathsheba for his wife. He sent word to his commander in the field to put Uriah at the front of the battle and make sure that he was killed by the enemy. This plan was successful. Bathsheba mourned Uriah for an acceptable period, then became David's wife and gave birth to a son.

Then God sent Nathan to David.

I have been learning about spiritual direction. Spiritual direction is a ministry of hospitality, friendship, and presence. It is companioning with someone, bearing witness to the "slow work of God" in their lives. It is a ministry of "holy listening." So, I really wanted this story of David and Nathan to be about spiritual direction. I really wanted to talk about Nathan as "spiritual director."

This story is not about holy listening, companioning, or the slow work of God. This story is about speaking truth to power. David was king and he was guilty of abusing his power, of covering up wrongdoing with more wrongdoing; of taking what didn't belong to him, because he could. It is also about the compounding nature of violence.

And Nathan is not a spiritual director in the sense that I am learning about, but a prophet of God, speaking truth to power. This story is not about being nice and not causing trouble. It is not about sucking up and being comfortable. It is about courage and integrity. It's about being powerful by standing up and speaking the truth.

Nathan tells David a parable about a rich man with lots of livestock and a poor man with but one ewe lamb. The rich man sees his possessions and wants to hold onto them, and the poor man loves and cares for his lamb like a daughter. The rich man, in spite of all his riches, takes from the poor man his only possession, his beloved possession, without permission and without compensation—because he can.

Unfortunately there are many applications today of this parable. One I know about, because of Bob's involvement in Colombia Support Network is our government's actions in the South American country of Colombia. Our government maintains a policy of spraying coca

plants in the effort to fight the war on drugs. Spraying also kills food crops. It poisons rivers and livestock and makes the children sick. It is devastating to the economy of the peasants and the ecology of the land. It makes it impossible for peasants to stay on their farms driving them from the land—land that is rich in oil and minerals, land that is taken over by powerful individuals and corporations. This is done with U.S. aid money and U.S. personnel. It may be called a war on drugs, or a war on terror, but it is a war on poor people because they have something we want.

David doesn't understand that this is a parable that Nathan has told him, and he is outraged. His reaction is to say that the rich man deserves to die, or at least be made to pay restitution. Then Nathan says, clearly, unequivocally, and I might add, not nicely, "You are that man."

Usually, the point of this story is that we are impressed with David, because he received this indictment from Nathan, and turned from his sin—repented—and wrote Psalm 78. And we should be impressed, and we should learn from him, because repenting is not nice business. It can be gut wrenching and costly and takes its own kind of integrity and courage.

But it's Nathan I want to learn from, at this point in my trying to follow Jesus.

Jack recently did a 2-part sermon on the question what is the appropriate response of the church to our country's policy of war and of torture. He used the passage from Luke 4 where Jesus goes to the temple and reads these words of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." I agree with Jack's statement that war and torture are completely incompatible with the message of Jesus. Jack challenged us to consider how we were to live by Isaiah's words and by Jesus' example.

It was in light of this question that Nathan's clarity of purpose and fearlessness in speaking the truth to David to show him that he was wrong, intrigued me.

I don't know what made Nathan the kind of person who could speak truth to power, but I know some of the things that are moving me closer to being a person who can. The living out of Isaiah's words is both the journey inward and the journey outward—and they are one journey. It is a matter of experiencing the good news, being set free, gaining sight, and getting relief from our burdens for ourselves, that enables us to act effectively as agents of good news, restored sight, freedom, and lightening the burdens of others.

The inward journey started out for me to be about comfort and love and belonging. Just like the words of Isaiah, it has been good news to my impoverished, burdened and imprisoned spirit. This is important and necessary, because it is the foundation for the outward journey of acting with courage, integrity and discernment, and speaking up. This is not a one time conversion or healing experience. It is a constant interplay between the inward and the outward—they are one journey.

Self awareness and integrity are the inward journey—telling the truth to others depends on telling the truth to yourself. This is where psychotherapy, small groups, discipling relationships, books we've read, healing prayer, sermons we've heard, aha moments, quiet times, meditation, Bible study, and all the rest, work on us, not so much to make us happy or make us fulfilled, or even keep us safe, as to grow us up into persons who can discern the truth and speak it out, and do so from a place of maturity and love and not from rebellion and vengeance.

We are not just in danger of not speaking up, of not speaking truth to power, but we are also in danger of letting our power go awry. We are in danger of, once finding our voice, taking license to bludgeon those who disagree with us. Peace workers face dangers. It is easy to move

into self righteousness, or into despair. If we do not keep watch, we can become what we fight, as violence wheedles its way into our spirits. It is easy to come to believe that the ends justify the means, as we sacrifice integrity and compassion to get the job done. It takes vigilance and discipline, and seeking. We all like to think that we are Nathan in this story, but sometimes we are David, needing to hear truth spoken to us.

Again, the situation in Colombia can inform us about peacemaking, power and nonviolence. Peasants in Colombia have formed some peace communities and cooperatives to work for land reform and labor reform and to gain political power to affect change. They have chosen to not arm themselves or align themselves with either the leftist rebels or the army and paramilitaries on the right. They have lumped all these groups together and refer to them as armed actor. They do not support or give aid to either side. The members of the peace communities, particularly their leaders, are at risk of being murdered, disappeared, and kidnapped. They choose nonviolence as a way of life and it is a courageous, compassionate endeavor. These are people who are speaking out and living nonviolently, but powerfully.

There are peace groups who send persons to these communities to live for a period of time. It is called accompaniment work. It makes it safer for the peace communities because the armed actors are less likely to do violence to them when there are Americans and Europeans present to witness, and to report to the world what is happening. The peace communities are strengthened and encouraged just by knowing that others care about them and do not forget them. I am strengthened and encouraged—and humbled—by their witness to peace and nonviolence, to the power of speaking up and resisting the seductive nature of power to take revenge and to get even.

Accompaniment and nonviolence are the outward journey—to put your life on the line with another, to walk along side of them, and to do so committed to nonviolence. Nonviolence doesn't mean being nice. It doesn't mean being passive. It doesn't mean ignoring what is ugly and wrong in the world, or missing what is at hand. It doesn't mean putting up with injustice because you don't want a fight. It means going into the fray of injustice and wrongdoing and ugliness, but not armed to do violence. It doesn't mean seeking revenge or being vengeful. This is not easy. We are especially adept at believing we can do this when it counts. It is awful to realize, I sometimes can't even do it when it doesn't count. How quickly I want to get even for the most minor infraction.

If we are serious about following Jesus, we really are about the business of working out our salvation in fear and trembling. We need to be learning about and practicing speaking truth to power whether it be to the oppressive, repressive systems of governments, businesses, or the nice, comfortable and only slightly oppressive systems in our churches, communities, families; and even within ourselves. It is not easy to confront a spouse, a boss, a friend, a pastor, or a teacher, on a matter of racial slurs, or self indulgence, or demeaning words, or vengeful actions. If I am silent while someone makes cruel fun of a gay person, or hits a child in the grocery store, or lies for personal gain, or steals and kills for national profit, I miss the opportunity to strengthen my muscles. It takes constant vigilance. Turns out, character does matter. Making the large, hard decisions comes out of our character, and character is built by the little decisions we make.

But we get to follow Jesus, and in the following, become like him. We get to be powerful, potent partners with God, and preach good news to the poor, give sight to the blind, and set the captives free. We get to be the recipients of good news, and the ministers of good news. We are ministers of good news whether it be in spiritual companionship where we

accompany another person being birthed into personal freedom and power, or in social/political action where schools are improved, prisons are made humane, schools of torture are closed, mourners are shielded from hateful demonstrations, letters are written to congresspersons and to newspaper editors, or accompaniment is provided to a Colombian peace community.

There is work to be done and it's important that we each find our power for living out Isaiah's words and following Jesus' example. It is important that we do all we can to become people who, like Nathan, can speak truth to power. It is important that every interaction contain within it integrity, and be nonviolent in nature. It matters, great and small, in our trying to follow Jesus. In spiritual direction, they talk about "Here we are, you and I, and I trust a Third is in our midst." There is work to be done, and here we are, you and I, and I trust a Third is in our midst, to accompany us and to empower us. Amen.