

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Jul 12th 2013

I have yet to be excessively persecuted for my belief in God. I have not been led before Governor Heineman, scourged by my friends, nor had my father rise up against me. I understand this may not be the reality for all people of God around the world, but from my privileged day-to-day existence in Omaha, Nebraska, Jesus' warnings in today's Gospel seems like overkill.

However, it was a pretty sound warning for first-century Palestine. Jesus sent his Apostles out on a dangerous endeavor – speaking and teaching in a manner that threatened the Roman Empire and challenged the local religious leaders. Many would lose their lives doing so. Though there is some speculation in the Christian tradition about how the Apostles died, it is commonly thought that most, if not all but John, were martyred for their beliefs. They were given the chance to renounce their faith in Jesus to prevent a horrific death, but none did. “You will be hated by all because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved.” Suffice to say, at the end the Apostles may have been hated, but they certainly endured to the end.

The political and religious climate of the world has changed a bit in the last 2000 years, yet we still have religious martyrs. However, for most Christians, that will not be our ultimate end. So how do we make meaning of today's Gospel?

I feel a good place to look is at Pope Francis. Since his election, the Pope has demonstrated a leadership and pastoral style different from other past or current faith leaders. It seems that I can't go a day without reading something about the latest thing the Pope did or said. Yet, the Pope's closer adherence to the Gospel message challenges some, as I'm sure it challenges him. To truly take the Pope's emphasis of simplicity and preferential option for the poor seriously requires sacrifice and change on the part of countless individuals both in the Vatican and in the pews of local churches. In much the same way that Jesus' message challenged the status quo of his time, Francis' message doesn't go against the professed beliefs of the Church, but it does conflict with the lifestyles and practices of people of faith around the world.

Jesus' warning about the discomfort his followers will experience, then, is as useful today as it was for the Apostles. A select few of us may still experience bodily harm and persecution for our faith; but, today, the biggest obstacle to authentic Christian living occurs within the realm of daily life.

Following Christ's teaching and example involves sacrifice and potential alienation from friends, colleagues, and social structures that promote living a comfortable lifestyle instead of the Gospel. More than that, though, we face an internal struggle and discomfort while striving to faithfully incorporate the Gospel into our lives.

Mother Teresa once said that “God does not require that we be successful only that we be faithful.” The Gospel makes it pretty clear that the Apostles weren't always successful at following Jesus, and the Pope might make the same claim about himself. Yet, for me, both are good examples of what faithfulness looks like, even if that faith gets difficult or uncomfortable at times.

Jeff Peak