

Sermon for Pentecost XXVI—Year C 2013
Have We Gone Too Far Or Not Far Enough?

Have there been times in your life when you ask yourself—
Have I gone too far? Or have I not gone far enough?

These are interesting questions to place side by side with the exhortation we just heard from Paul that *we not be weary in doing what is right* and Jesus' promise that our endurance will gain our souls.

However, doing the right thing can be tough—tough to discern, tough to put into practice, and really tough to practice *consistently*. Staying the course and using critical thinking to decide which is the right path—these are skills not often developed or even prized much in our culture. Let's face it; we live in a throwaway age. For example, it's cheaper to toss our old inkjet printers rather than have them repaired or trade in our perfectly serviceable clothing for the latest fashion. And who has time to weigh the difference between what is right versus what is expedient versus what fulfills the needs and desires of our hearts?

If we are honest, we do become weary of doing right. "Compassion fatigue" can afflict even the most generous-hearted people. The most well intentioned and passionate among us can fall prey to cynicism and become disillusioned when desired outcomes don't materialize. Those wide, well-trodden paths of denial and avoidance look far more easier to traverse than the tortuous climb to the mountaintop in the pursuit of justice or truth or making peace. Forget the road less traveled . . . let's just find and walk those well-worn paths of least resistance.

But what do you do when your world is falling apart?
How do you know when you've gone too far or not far enough?

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus and the disciples have been to the great Temple in Jerusalem and as they are leaving some of the disciples begin speaking about the Temple's magnificence and how great and large the stones were that formed its foundation.

But Jesus does not admire them as his disciples' do. Instead he throws a bit of cold water on them when he says—
"As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

Seeing the truth can be difficult.
Discovering the significance of a moment is seldom easy.
So throughout the Gospels, Jesus helps his followers to have “eyes to see”
and “ears to hear.”
All of this is taking place in the week that Jesus will go all the way to the Cross,
so he continues to help his disciples look beyond appearances and trust God.

In his usual cryptic, mysterious style,
Jesus warns his disciples not to be led astray by others
who will come after him claiming to know “when the end times” will come.
Jesus tells the disciples not to be worried by wars or rumors of wars,
earthquakes or famine, as these are only the things that will come first.
He does not answer the disciples’ question directly.
Instead, he sets out for them a way to live that does not focus all of their attention
on the destruction of the Temple or even the second coming.
Instead, he helps them look past appearances and tells them to trust God—
to endure and not be weary of doing good.

Jesus’ remarks about the Temple’s destruction—
not to mention the list of calamities that followed
the “all will be thrown down” prediction must have devastated the disciples.
After all, the Jerusalem Temple was the heart and soul of Israel’s worship.

What or who would they be without the Temple?

It is helpful to remember that this morning’s gospel lesson
follows the story of the widow’s mite . . .
where Jesus observes a widow’s offering at the Temple
and compares her giving of the mite which was *all* that she had
with the ostentatious giving of a rich man, who in fact gained his wealth
by devouring the houses of widows making the widows destitute in the first place.
The Temple might look beautiful on the outside,
but there were some pretty ugly things happening on the inside . . .
yet most people could not see it.
Except, of course, Jesus who looks at these things and us
in a different way than the rest of us do . . .

All this grandeur may impress you, Jesus says, but it all will be thrown down.
And then Jesus goes even further . . . some might even say he goes too far . . .
Not only the Temple but most of Jerusalem will be destroyed.
When will this happen, the disciples ask.
Yet Jesus did not answer their question and instead goes even farther and
offers a portrait filled with apocalyptic imagery—
wars, famines, plagues, earthquakes . . .

It is easy to be overwhelmed by these images
. . . or perhaps it is easier to just ignore them altogether.

Nevertheless, I imagine there are many of us who wonder
if the world is falling apart before our eyes.
Perhaps we even wonder if the Church, too, is falling apart before our eyes.

How do we act in these trying times?
How do we know as followers of Christ if we have gone too far or not far enough?

The focus of Jesus' teaching today is not really about the end of the world itself
or even the signs that accompany it.

(Those who focus and obsess on these things have, in my humble opinion,
definitely gone too far!)

No, the focus is, rather, on what all these things will mean for Jesus' disciples.
But the disciples want to know when these things will occur,
they want the "4-1-1"—to be "in the know."

Instead Jesus tells them what *not* to do when the world seems to be falling apart.

Now some of us may never experience real persecution
or be put on trial because of our faith in Christ,
yet . . . we all know that in some small and even some big ways,
following Jesus will put us at odds with the values of this world,
and at times with the values and opinions of our friends and even our families.

The truth is, *our faith is always on trial in the world*, every single day of our lives.
And our faith is most challenged when tragedy or stress come to call.

So . . . what do we do when the world as we know it seems to be falling apart?

Jesus offers these directives to his disciples:

- do not be misled by false promises.
- do not be terrified.
- do not prepare your defense in advance.

In other words: Do not be anxious. Do not look for quick fixes or the easy way out.
And do not become defensive.

Unfortunately, when the world is falling apart, most people—
Christian or non-Christians alike—
end up doing the exact things Jesus warns us not to do.

We become anxious . . . We excessively worry . . .
We look for a quick fix or play the blame game to relieve our burden.
We may seek in our mind a defense or retribution
against those who we believe have caused the hurt we are experiencing.

Yet the question Jesus poses to his disciples then and now is not—
how will you react to and survive these times?

No, instead he asks—*What will be your witness?*
When times are trying—and they most certainly will be and are—
What will be your witness?

Paul seems to answer this question of Jesus, when he writes to encourage those going through trying times and tells them to *not grow weary of doing good*—For *that* is our witness!

Did you hear that line in the gospel today where Jesus uses the word “opportunity”? Jesus says that all of this—the crumbling of our worlds, and the trials that come with it . . . will give you the opportunity to testify.

Now usually when we think of opportunity we think of something new, something good. We speak of the opportunity to try to learn something new, or an opportunity for a new job . . .

We say things like—“That is a good opportunity for her—” or “That is a wonderful opportunity for him . . .”

We usually do not think of earthquakes, wars and trials as opportunities.

But Jesus does.

And when these opportunities come along, he wants us to testify . . .

to be a witness to God’s grace—

He wants us to share our story,

to tell others about how Jesus is transforming us—

making it possible for us to endure, to not grow weary of doing good—

to keep on returning good for evil,

to continue to show mercy, to love kindness, to do justice—

All of this is being a faithful witness to the gospel—

To testify to the real foundation upon which our lives are built—

the love of God in Christ.

That is a foundation, the cornerstone that will not be destroyed or thrown down.

Have we gone too far? Or not far enough?

How do we live today when we don’t know tomorrow?

How do we live when the world we know seems to be crumbling around us?

We draw strength from God, who invites our participation and who endures long after the cities and buildings and stones have crumbled.

We trust the One who has called us to bring the Kingdom of God just a bit closer.

We love our neighbor as we love our selves.

We pray without ceasing and trust that we can do all things

through God who strengthens us to persevere and keep us from growing weary of

(to paraphrase John Wesley)

Doing all the good we can. By all the means we can.

In all the ways we can. In all the places we can.

At all the times we can. To all the people we can. As long as ever we can.

Thanks be to God who accompanies us and loves us through all the times we go too far and not far enough!