

## “GOOD CITIZENSHIP”

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Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

The Gospel lesson today, as laid out in the Lectionary Cycle, seems to be missing something. Verse 31 begins, “at that very hour”. But, at what very hour? To answer that we have to look back at verse 30.

Verse 30 says, “Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

Then, at that very hour — at that very moment, some Pharisees drop by, and you can almost hear Luke say, “Speak of the devil!”

These Pharisees, usually painted as enemies of Jesus, come to warn him. *Warn him?* But they’re his enemies! They warn him that Herod wants to kill him, but they’re in cahoots with Herod!

OK, now maybe Luke has omitted some important piece of information. But with what he’s written up to this point, the only way this makes sense is that the Pharisees have some ulterior motive. Either that, or they’ve had a life-changing experience akin to Saul’s conversion - and there’s nothing to indicate that.

In fact, it almost seems like a dramatic or literary device, simply to give Luke the opportunity to quote Jesus saying, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’”

So are we any clearer now? I don’t know about you, but this short passage just doesn’t want to hang together. First, Jesus says the first will be last. Then those who consider themselves first come along to warn Jesus, whom they consider a foolish but troublesome loose cannon. And now Jesus talks about 3 days work and the need to be in Jerusalem to be killed.

This play won’t sell. It’s just jumps back and forth too often. The drama critics will kill it before it plays a full week!

So, out of curiosity, let’s see what comes next . . . “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

OK, another seismic shift . . . now Jesus wants to embrace the city, its populace, its Pharisees, maybe even Herod, in a loving parental protective hug. Hmmmmm . . . I’m still not making much sense of this.

Let’s try something different. Let’s change the backdrop. 21<sup>st</sup> century, U.S.A.

Jesus is a passionate advocate for some cause . . . it doesn’t matter what the cause is, for the moment. He’s been discussing it with his staff, when some slick lobbyists from the opposing side stop by his office. His aide mutters under her breath, “Speak of the devil!”

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“Jesus, my good man! So good to see you! You know, I have the greatest regard for you, and I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you — or to your family. But there’s a move afoot to squash that legislation you’re supporting. There’s a group heading here right now to frame you and ruin your reputation, so that you’ll no longer be welcome here. You won’t be able to get anything done . . . you know the saying, “dead men don’t talk.” If I were you, I’d lie low for a while — maybe take the wife on a little trip out of the country.”

To which Jesus responds, “Go tell your buddies that I intend to continue my work. I’ll be here for a demonstration today and another one tomorrow — you can count on it! And once I’ve finished with the statehouse here in Jersey, I’m heading all the way to the steps of Congress and the White House.

“I know well that your goons have chased off my predecessors, killing their idealism and their dreams in that swirling cesspool of Washington. I know I won’t be welcome either, but I won’t bend. You’ll have to kill me, along with the hopes and dreams of all the people I represent!”

And now, the last part begins to make a little more sense to me — maybe it will to you too.

Jesus looks them in the eye and says, “I know you feel threatened. I know that you can’t imagine another way of doing things. I know you don’t want to relinquish the death-hold you have on the system. But if you persist, if you don’t change, you’ll self-destruct. I really don’t want that to happen. I care about you. That’s really what this is all about — it’s what I’ve been preaching all along. I want you to join with me in a new way of doing things. But the ball is in your court.”<sup>1</sup>

And now maybe we have a little better picture of Luke’s theme, which is a call to repentance. In Jesus’ day it was a futile call. In Luke’s Gospel, it certainly seems as though Jesus knew it would end with his death in Jerusalem. The authorities wouldn’t repent. The injustices and the sacrilege would remain. But he planted seeds . . . seeds of the Church, through a rag-tag band of 12 disciples and the women who supported them on their journey.

Although their leader was executed, and although they had no political power, their banner was to become the cross, the instrument of torture that was ultimately overcome by an unearthly power that does not bow to political machinations . . . whether government politics, office politics, or church politics. The message of the cross is that Jesus emptied himself of all power, therefore in truth achieving what Rome’s violence could not. And that is the model for our Christian life, our heavenly citizenship. The Pax Romana was effected by threat of violent force. The Pax Christi was effected by humility and love. There could be nothing more different then, and it’s still scandalous today. We follow the Prince of Peace, the one who endured the cross without saying a word in his own defense, the one who chastised Peter for cutting off the ear of the servant of the high priest who arrested him. It is truly a scandalous, foolish model by earthly standards. And it is what we are called to imitate.

In his pre-Christian epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien echoes this profoundly Christian understanding of what it means to be a friend rather than an enemy of the cross, to borrow Paul’s language in our Epistle reading.

The Fellowship of the Ring is a company of Nine Walkers who, with the exception of the wizard Gandalf, are fairly ordinary creatures. They are set against the Nine Riders, the wrathful and merciless slaves of the dark lord Sauron. Sauron had fashioned a Ring of absolute power in order to conquer the known world with it. The One Ring has come into the possession of Frodo, a seemingly insignificant hobbit and member of the

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Fellowship. Nearly everyone assumes that the only means of resisting Sauron’s murderous determination to reclaim the ring is to use it against him—to fight fire with fire, terror with terror, coercive might with coercive might. Indeed, anyone who suggests any other option is regarded as foolish in the extreme. All other ways are but paths of despair.

Yet Gandalf counsels the more excellent way, the way of surrender rather than the use of coercive power. In virtual echoes of Paul’s summons to the folly of the cross, Gandalf urges the Fellowship on with these words,<sup>2</sup>

Let folly be our cloak, a veil before the eyes of the Enemy. For [Sauron] is very wise, and weighs all things to a nicety in the scales of his malice. But the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power; and so he judges all hearts. Into his heart the thought will not enter that any will refuse [such power], that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it. If we seek this we shall put him out of all reckoning.<sup>3</sup>

God, through Jesus Christ, has shown us the way. It is a way of humble self-emptying and of sacrifice. But it is also a journey, during which we are embraced by a loving Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, whose love and mercy are indescribable. The country of our citizenship is one that is ruled by love, dependent upon faith, and nurtured in hope. Jesus himself desires to gather us in. But the ball is in our court.

### Closing Prayer:

Refuge of our hearts, we must admit that all too often you are not the center of our lives. We find shelter in all the false securities the world offers, rather than grounding ourselves in your promises. Our emotions drive our fears, and so we end up making foolish choices, rather than being guided by your word and heart. We turn to the politicians, the celebrities, the commentators to give us guidelines for living, rather than following the One who comes in your name.

We ask one thing of you, our God, that you not hide your face from us, but turn to us with forgiveness and hope. Be gracious to us, so we might share such grace with those around us. Fill our emptiness with your love, so we might become more loving. Open our hearts, as well as our eyes, to see the One who comes to gather us up and lead us into your kingdom, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

## ENDNOTES

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1. Inspired by Rodney Clapp, “Pastoral Perspective on Luke 13:31-35”, in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 70.

2. Ralph C. Wood, “Theological Perspective on Philippians 3:17-4:1”, in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 64-66.

3. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 282-283, as quoted by Ralph C. Wood, *ibid.*