

Sermon Text for July 10, 2016

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Matthew 12:9-14, Genesis 39:6b-23

“When doing the right thing gets you into trouble”

Thank you for allowing me a week away to recharge and reenergize. It was interesting to go back to a church where you have served 10 years later. To be honest I spent more time with people from within the community where I served than with the members of the church where I served. It was a bit of a culture shock to be reminded of what it was like to serve in a community that was racially divided. As the mayor drove me around town I was able to see the blight that was in the black community and the wealth that was in the white community. It was such an important part of my ministry for 8 years and then again for the 5 years that we served in Moscow. So for the past 5 years I had not forgotten, but just not been assaulted daily by the reality of how different things are in our communities.

What a tragedy this past week has been. It is hard to not choose sides, but that is not what we are called to do. It is hard to live lives guided and directed by the principles that our Holy Book demands. But we must do it. As we are somewhat protected by what is happening in our cities and in towns all across these United States, what are we called to do? This is a difficult question because sometimes, doing the right thing gets you into trouble. There is no guarantee that if you follow God’s will, that you are going to be protected, that your life will be spared. No, in fact, the example that we have before us is Jesus, and what did doing the right thing get him? So we have to be comfortable, well, at least aware, that doing the right thing just might get you into trouble. We just might get ourselves into trouble today.

Today our Scripture needs to have a disclaimer, something like: parent you might want to make sure your children aren’t paying attention. I call this Scripture Joseph and Mrs. Robinson and I can’t help but see Dustin Hoffman and Anne Bancroft as I read through this Scripture. Actually, also in little big man, Dustin Hoffman and Faye Dunaway. We’ve seen Joseph all along as the dreamer, the idealist who didn’t know better, but today he is confronted with having to make a decision.

It is not like Joseph has been sheltered. Think of the trauma he has been through and now, as a slave, he is confronted with another reality that we haven’t seen him have to face yet. Up to now since he has been in Egypt he has kept his nose clean, he has done the right thing, but he still gets into trouble. In every decision that he makes we find that he is always faithful to

God. But instead of being rewarded and getting out of trouble, we find that he gets himself into trouble again.

Like Joseph we are constantly confronted with choices in our lives. There are times that we could easily do that which we know is wrong but we also know we could get away with it. Adultery, stealing, lying, but in the end the question arises who are we sinning against, ourselves, our victim, or as Joseph states, our decisions to do good or bad must be seen in the light that we are deciding for or against God. The typical culprits of stealing and lying today are probably replaced with how do we view the person who is different from us, and knowing that if we view him or her as a brother or a sister, it just might get us into trouble, but that is okay.

In our first Scripture today Jesus is confronted with a dilemma between doing what he knows is right or doing what the current social and religious laws say was right. You are not allowed to do any work on the Sabbath. But Jesus chose to do the work of compassion, healing, and touched a person and gave them new life.

The result of this act of righteousness and justice ultimately killed him, the Pharisees were enraged and conspired to kill him. But 2000 years later all of us would agree that he did the right thing. He put people and their needs, he put God's desire and will above what the society and the religion dictated.

Joseph is faced with a completely different situation. He is in charge of his master's house. He has control over all things and can use all things except of course his master's wife. This is understood in the text. The master's wife can be easily identified as a combination between Mrs. Robinson and Glenn Close in fatal attraction. After repeated advances on this young, handsome man who continues to refuse her because of his respect for his master but even more importantly because of his devotion and dedication to God, she gets desperate and she gets angry.

She was used to getting what she wanted, she was a very powerful person after all. So many times those who are in power feel as if they are beyond the reach of the law or of moral obligation that they get a sense that they can get away with anything. I was listening to the president of the Fraternal Order of Police on NPR yesterday and he said something very interesting, he said that police have been asking for more training, for more options other than lethal force and the use of lethal weapons. They want that as well, but those in power have not responded. Just think if our officers had other means to control suspects other than a gun the difference that would make. Because when you hold a gun there is the false impression that you are in charge, whether you are facing people of color at a traffic stop, or white police officers in a

demonstration. But the emphasis in this story is on Joseph and how he could have easily accepted the invitation because after all nobody would know, but instead he refuses because God would know.

What a testimony. How many of us stop ourselves because we know that God would not approve. Or do we use as our measuring stick if our wives, or our families, or our community would find out. Joseph raises the bar and states, no I will not because my God would not approve. As a result of his insistence the wife gets desperate. She sends all the help away, Joseph comes to do his daily chores and walks right into the trap. She corners him, grabs his jacket, but he runs away leaving his clothes in her hand.

This isn't the first time that he loses his clothes and has to act without them. Remember the coat of many colors which is stripped from him and used as proof of his death. Here his clothes are used by her as proof of his, albeit falsified, attempts against the wife, which if he is discovered to have been guilty, would surely lead to his death. But we find that the clothes don't make the man, the dream does.

The master comes home and he is furious. Now if he had really been mad he would have killed Joseph, he had every right to. Instead he throws him in jail, he must have known his wife pretty well. Once Joseph is in jail, once again everything he touches and does turns to gold. His work is exemplary. Joseph was put in a situation where he chose to do the right thing and he is rewarded by getting thrown in jail. Don't let anyone tell you that if you keep your nose clean, and if you do what you are told things will work out.

It just is not true. Often times we do the right thing and we still get into trouble. But what happens with Joseph? Does he say as so many of us have at one time or another, well if doing the right thing and being good gets me into trouble then I might as well do what I want. After all, what does Billy Joel say, I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. Sinners are much more fun. No, God continues to bless him, and in the end in God's plan we see that Joseph being in jail is exactly where God want him so that he can be noticed and placed in the position of power where he was supposed to be.

Part of the vision that we have as a church relates to this tension between doing what is expected and what has always been done with doing the right thing that ultimately may be the risky thing and it might get us into trouble. As a church we can continue to run things the way they always have been running. It has been going very well. We could very easily keep our programs, our staff, our buildings just the way they are, after all it is easier that way, less risky, and it sure is tempting.

But what if the church steps out like Joseph. What if after decades of being tempted and lulled into a place of comfort and ease the church decides to step away from the adulteress that I call culture and society and pursues a dream founded on the God of justice and righteousness. What if the church decides not to succumb to the voices that say we will take care of your children, don't worry, just send them to us and we will take care of them. What if the church moves out and becomes the care takers of the children, what if the church steps away and becomes the meeting place for families and singles instead of the bars and the malls. How exciting it would be to leave the grasp of the adulteress who would hold us down. How exciting to step away from what is wrong but that we are told that it is okay, and pursue what is righteous and just.

But like Joseph, sometimes we have to leave something behind if you pursue what is right. We might have to leave behind our cloak of decency and in order. We might have to leave behind certain sacred cows that prevent us from fulfilling God's plan. It is scary to be out and about doing what is right but not knowing what the future holds.

God calls us as a church to do what is right, even if it is risky. God calls us to pursue our dreams even as the adulterous hands of society reach out and try to draw us back to our initial state. God calls us to continue to move forward even if what we do fails, backfires, or isn't what we think it should be because maybe, just maybe it is what God wants. Amen.