

Sermon for 2 Lent
Sunday March 4, 2007
- Susan Flanders
Phil. 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35

One of the hardest things in the world is seeing someone you love, or some group or community you love, destroying themselves. Especially if you've tried to influence them - through teaching, advice, or by example, and still they persist. If you feel powerless to do anything but stand by and watch the destruction, that can be even worse - either way, you can end up angry, despairing, reduced to tears. But all of this is really because of love - if you didn't care, it wouldn't matter.

In today's readings, we have both Paul and Jesus lamenting destructive behavior in communities they love - in this case, for Paul, the Christians in Corinth, for Jesus, the city of Jerusalem.

It seems Paul is upset about the values and priorities of the Christians at Corinth. He makes it sound as though gluttony is their big problem, "their god is the belly", but he also talks of shame and earthly things, implying that they are caught up in a variety of selfish, materialistic pursuits. Most tellingly, he calls them enemies of the cross of Christ - he says he does this with tears. They just don't get it! They ignore the cross, the high cost of following Jesus. Apparently, they don't want to be bothered with what it costs to try to live by a radical ethic of love and self-giving - they are not open to being transformed into new people.

Jesus directs his upset first to Herod and then to the whole city of Jerusalem. Calling Herod "that fox", he defiantly lays out what he is called to do. As healer and prophet, he intends to continue until he does reach Jerusalem, and there, along with so many other prophets, he will be rejected and killed. And so we have his powerful lament over this still tortured city: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

Because of love, Paul and Jesus suffer and mourn over these communities, these people who will not, or maybe cannot, seem to respond and shape up - even for their own good.

What parent had never been in this bind? You see your child making bad choices, wandering away in self-destructive behavior, despite all you've said and done, all your best efforts as a parent. Maybe you even see it as your own failure - Maybe Paul and Jesus did too - frustration and guilt mixed in with their desire to make things better.

In the readings, Paul and Jesus do several of the things we also do when trying to influence others to behave in more life-giving ways. Paul hopes the Corinthians will follow his example and that they will be imitators of the behavior he is trying to model. Don't we wish! At baptism, one question asked of parents is this: "Will you, by word and example, proclaim the good news of God in Christ?" At ordination, clergy are asked to pattern their own and their families' and communities' lives according to Christ's teachings so as to be a wholesome example to others. Setting a good example is important. The problem is, it doesn't always work – so often, we really learn only from making mistakes, from our own trial and error. My Dad often used to say with some chagrin that it's too bad one generation can't learn more from the one before it. The human race would be so much more advanced if we didn't have to keep making the same mistakes. How true – about our children, our churches, and certainly about nations and political leaders as well.

Another problem with setting an example for others to follow is hypocrisy. So often we say one thing but another. We tell our children not to use drugs, and then we drink too much, or we tell them to be kind, and then we gossip cruelly behind the backs of people we say we like. We chide other nations about nuclear weapons and global warming, but we are the one nation to have actually used these weapons, and are one of the largest, if not the largest, producers of greenhouse gases. Setting an example is easier said than done, and there are no guarantees that it will work.

Besides example, Paul and Jesus offer criticism, pointing out destructive behavior and its consequences. As parents, we do the same. We want our children to think about and be held accountable for the results of their actions. We often use bad results as a threat: "you'll have to go to your room; you'll be grounded; you won't get into a good college". These threats may or may not work, but certainly facing the consequences of our behavior is part of becoming mature and responsible. And so we try.

Another way to get at this – a kind of antidote to criticism – is promise – inviting different choices in order to achieve goals. Paul talks metaphorically of a heavenly citizenship. Parents may offer the promise of happiness, security, success. Again – the use of criticism and pointing out consequences are things we see in wider arenas as well – the Anglican Communion, the family of nations.

The carrots and sticks of promises and threats are basic common stock in our dealing with one another. We so much long to change others' behavior, and we are so unsure of what might work. (And yes, we might do better to focus on our own behavior where we have at least a bit more influence – but that's another sermon.)

And so, we lament – over our children, over others we love, individuals and groups. We sorrow over the divisions in the Episcopal Church and in our Anglican

Communion; we rage and weep too as the war in Iraq drags on. Try as we might, we often can't find the method, don't have the power to fix what we see going wrong. I imagine the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and our own Presiding Bishop, Katharine Schori lamenting in this way as they see the dissension in our church. How can they steer clear of schism and defend a Gospel of open, welcoming love and shared ministry when some groups read the Bible so very differently from others and at least one side sees itself as absolutely right and the rest of us as betrayers of orthodoxy, revisionists of the faith. I would not be surprised at all to learn that these two wise and loving bishops, trying so hard to keep us together and do the right thing, have literally shed bitter tears over our Anglican Communion as we continue to gnaw at one another - not following the example of Christ, not setting an example for a broken world. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often have I desired to gather your children together... but you were not willing."

Jesus' lament is that of parents, lovers, friends and beyond that - the lament of all in authority over groups torn by violence or self-destructive behavior. It is the lament of a lover who stands by watching the beloved damage herself. We may believe it is the lament of a loving God - watching God's people stumble and fall, watching us clutch at false saviors and betray the best that is in us, watching us reject the citizenship given us at our creation as God's beloved children. Our faith is that God's grace is offered always, and to all - but, like the people of Jerusalem, our recognition of this grace comes hard. They could not see Jesus for the savior he was until he was on the way to his trial and the cross - riding into Jerusalem one fine spring morning. Then, finally, they picked up their palm branches and shouted out, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

What does it take for us to influence others, to inspire transformation? Which of the methods I've mentioned can work? We try our best, but the other's response is beyond our control. Yet, even so, because of love, we try, always, to bring an end to self-destructive, death-dealing behavior. We feel outrage and frustration, yet we act in hope anyway, we try to love our neighbors.

We can't do it on our own. We need help; we really do need saving. We gather in faith under God's sheltering wings, embraced by a love that would see us all marvelously transformed, fully alive and open to a new world. What will it take to get us to recognize and trust in and give ourselves to this love that sustains the world? We can, perhaps, start with this simple Native American prayer, expressing our longing:

"Dear Jesus, as a hen covers her chicks with her wings to keep them safe, do thou this (day/night) protect us under your golden wings." Amen.