

The Image of Faith

A Sermon on Jeremiah 32:6-15 and Luke 16:19-31 by the Rev. Philip Major
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This summer one of our members went to the trouble and expense of purchasing and installing a beautiful Ukrainian flag outside our front door on Fayette Street. When I see the Ukrainian flag I think of a photo I saw in the New York Times last winter. The photo was taken in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. The photo showed a group of adults preparing to defend their homes and their homeland from the Russian army.

These people were not soldiers, but they were practicing defensive military drills. These citizens of Ukraine did not hold actual rifles. They were civilians. They were teachers and shopkeepers and mothers. They were engaging in military drills with toy rifles. These Ukrainians were wearing regular, civilian clothes.

I'll never forget the image of one young woman because she looked so much like my own daughter. The woman in the photo was probably a few years younger than my daughter, just twenty or twenty-five years old. Her hair was long and brown, like my daughter's hair. She was wearing a brown winter coat, the kind you buy at Target. She wore a hat and mittens that reminded me of the hats my daughter knits. The young woman did not look like someone who would be willing to kill a fish or a chicken, let alone another person.

Yet the young woman and the other citizens of Ukraine were determined to defend their nation from the invading army. Some people in the United States believed Mr. Putin when he said he would not invade Ukraine, but the young woman knew the hard truth. Mr. Putin's army was preparing to launch thousands of missiles and artillery shells that would destroy the apartment buildings and theaters and churches of Ukraine. The young woman knew the hard truth. Mr. Putin would order hundreds of thousands of Russian troops to invade Ukraine. She knew the Russians would proceed to torture and kill thousands of Ukrainians just like her.

For me, the young woman in the brown coat, holding the toy rifle is the image of faith. This is what faith looks like. Faith is standing up for what is right, even when the forces of violence and oppression are preparing to attack you. Faith is refusing to give up, even when the situation appears to be hopeless.

This is one of the messages of the story of Jeremiah and the vineyard. Like the young woman in the brown coat, Jeremiah's nation and home were threatened by an enormous invading army. The story took place in the tenth year of King Zedekiah, which was in 588 BC. *At that time the army of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem.*

Jeremiah knew the hard truth. In just a few months the Babylonians would break through the walls of the city of Jerusalem. The invaders would rape and pillage and destroy the Temple. The Babylonians would take all of the people with any sort of power or wealth back to Babylon. The captives would live by the waters of Babylon, in exile, for several decades.

Like the young woman, Jeremiah's situation appeared to be hopeless. Yet, like the young woman in the brown coat, Jeremiah took clear, concrete action. The young Ukrainian woman took clear, concrete action by training with military instructors to defend her homeland. Jeremiah bought a vineyard in his hometown, Anathoth. The account says Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel came to him *in the court of the guard*. Jeremiah had been imprisoned by the King of Judah. So Hanamel visited him in prison..and said, *"Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of possession and redemption is yours."*

Jeremiah's cousin wanted to sell his vineyard. Perhaps he knew that the town would soon be overrun by the Babylonian army. In ancient Israel, if you wanted to sell your house or a field, you were required to offer it to your closest relations first. That is why Hanamel said, "The right of possession

and redemption is yours.” It was not unusual that Hanamel would come to his cousin Jeremiah, even as he was held in prison, and offer to sell a piece of land. Yet there is part of the story that seemed quite absurd at the time.

Like the young woman in the brown coat, Jeremiah was doing something absurd. It was quite absurd to think that the young woman, who did not even have an actual rifle, might defend her nation against one of the most powerful armies in the world. Likewise, it was quite absurd for Jeremiah to purchase the vineyard from his cousin. The vineyard in question was just a few miles away from Jerusalem. Already the invading army was quite close to the city. Everyone knew what would happen. Why would anyone spend eight precious ounces of silver to buy a piece of land that would soon be taken over by an invading army?

Jeremiah takes this action because he has faith in what God has promised him. This is what faith looks like. Faith is Jeremiah, imprisoned by the king, deciding to purchase a vineyard in the land of Judah, even though Jeremiah knows Judah is about to be overrun by an invading army. Faith is the young woman in the brown winter coat holding a toy rifle, preparing to defend her home from an invading army. Faith is Rosa Parks, refusing to give up her seat on the city bus, even though she knows she might be arrested by the police. Faith is the women of Iran taking off their headscarves and burning them in protest against the killing of Masha Amini by the Iranian morality police.

We know what faith looks like. Faith is standing up for what is good and right, even in the face of suffering and persecution.

If we know what faith looks like the next step is to learn the difference between right and wrong. This is essential because people are often quite confused about what is right and what is wrong. The people who stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6th thought they were doing the right thing.

Jesus adds this essential element to the picture of faith we see in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus gives us a clear foundation for understanding what is right and what is wrong.

We find Jesus’ clear, powerful instructions all through the Gospel of Luke. In many cases Luke has collected these sayings of Jesus in their simplest, most direct form: Love your enemies. Do not judge. Forgive one another.

Sometimes Jesus’ message about what is right and what is wrong is contained in stories. In the story of Lazarus and rich man, Jesus turns our expectations upside down. The way the world works for most people is that we know the names of all of the rich people, but the poor and the weak are often nameless, almost invisible. In Jesus’ story, the rich man doesn’t even get a name. Jesus cares about Lazarus, the poor man who suffered.

From this story we gain more about what is right and what is wrong. It is wrong to be greedy. It is wrong to keep your wealth to yourself. It is right to take care of the poor and the sick. It is right to be merciful. The story of Lazarus and the rich man point toward another foundation for understanding what is right and what is wrong. According to Jesus, those who have the most power have a greater obligation to do what is right.

I call this set of teachings from Jesus "Christian Moral Teaching". Those who follow Jesus, especially in recent years, are sometimes discouraged, and sometimes confused, because some people have turned Jesus' moral teachings upside down, and yet still describe themselves as Christians. It is very discouraging to see people use the language and symbols of Christianity in support of a morality that runs exactly counter to what Jesus taught us. That doesn't mean we should turn away from the moral foundation given to us by Jesus. The moral foundation given by Jesus is the way we know the difference between right and wrong.

Even though we face many challenges in our time, we seek to be faithful and stand up for what is right. Being faithful means learning the difference between right and wrong. Being faithful means taking a stand for what is right. Being faithful means using the power we have been given to bring more of God’s love to the world.