

## **“A Sermon about the Crazyiness of Speaking Truth to Power”**

**John 18:28-40**

**March 11, 2018**

Yesterday as I officiated the wedding of a couple of young women, it gave me the opportunity to remember a slew of weddings that had taken place just three years ago. It was three years ago and a few months that marriage equality had finally become the law of the land. And a couple weeks following that ruling, our church hosted a 24-hour marriage-a-thon, offering weddings free-of-charge to anyone who was interested in tying the knot. I remember it as quite the media circus! But finally, I thought, the day of which we had long dreamed had arrived and life would be better for all of us.

But who could have predicted that just three years later the prejudice and oppression against same-sex couples would simply shift to the transgender community, and we would find ourselves fighting for the rights and dignity of our transgender siblings?

I wonder if Jesus also reflected on days gone by as he stood before Pilate, the prefect of Judea. I wonder, as Jesus heard the charges brought against him, did he recall the freely flowing wine at a wedding just three years earlier because of a miracle he had performed? And as he did, did he wonder what series of life events had conspired to bring him to this place in time?

One of the high points of his life would have been when he looked out over the hungry masses and, filled with compassion, he managed to feed thousands of peasants with nothing more than a couple sardine-sized fish and a few small loaves of bread. “Where had those glory days gone?” he must have wondered, as he found himself faced with trumped up charges of insurrection against the Roman Empire.

Although Pilate only seemed to be mildly interested in the charges that had been drawn up against Jesus, he did take issue with anyone who claimed to be King. Pilate was the local representative of the Emperor Tiberius, after all. You couldn’t have people going around claiming to be king, even if they seemed as harmless and passive as this man Jesus.

And so he asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” But his attempt at interrogation is shifted by Jesus from a discussion about power to a discussion about truth. Pilate’s questions about kingship of this world are redirected to the question of truth prompting him to ask, “What is truth?”

Jesus was speaking truth to power. He was speaking the truth of his realm’s nonviolence and radical forgiveness and table fellowship to Pilate’s world of power and politics.

As I sat and reflected on this, I couldn’t help but think about another drama of speaking truth to power that has been playing out in the news headlines lately. In the tragic wake of the seventeen lives brutally cut short in Florida, politicians are telling us that now is not the time to talk about guns. But our country’s youth are no longer willing to risk their lives waiting for someone else to take action to stop the epidemic of mass school shootings that has become all too familiar.

As I watched high school student Emma Gonzalez confront the National Rifle Association spokesperson, I couldn’t help but see the similarities between the young girl’s unlikely call for the banning the purchase of semi-automatic and fully automatic weapons and Jesus’ unlikely call to a world of peace, forgiveness, and nonviolence.

And as I watched 17-year-old Cameron Kasky confront Senator Marco Rubio and two other politicians in a way that few journalists have ever managed, asking “Would you refuse to accept donations from the National Rifle Association in the future?” I saw this student lay bare the inauthenticity of politicians in a way that had not been done before.

Speaking truth to power is risky business, but I believe it’s the business to which God calls us. Bible scholar Karoline Lewis says, “Working for God’s kingdom feels like a rather futile determination. It’s not just an uphill battle -- it’s unfeasible, even ridiculous to think that our efforts and energies can turn a world around into the world God sees it can be. It is beyond hard to believe that we can stand up against the unacceptable, but we have to believe it -- we just have to. To love fiercely even in the face

of fear.” That’s what Jesus was doing in this morning’s reading and it’s what these young student activists inspire me to do: to love fiercely even in the face of fear.

Novelist and poet Jack Kerouac, known to many as the Father of the Beat Generation, wrote a poem that I think is appropriate for today’s thoughts on speaking truth to power. It’s called “Here’s to the Crazy Ones,” and it goes like this:

Here's to the crazy ones. / The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. / The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. / And they have no respect for the status quo. / You can praise them, disagree with them, quote them, / disbelieve them, glorify or vilify them. / About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. / They invent. They imagine. / They heal. They explore. They create. They inspire. / They push the human race forward. / Maybe they have to be crazy. / How else can you stare at an empty canvas and see a work of art? / Or sit in silence and hear a song that’s never been written? / Or gaze at a red planet and see a laboratory on wheels? / While some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. / Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, / are the ones who do.

Jesus was crazy. He was crazy enough to turn the other cheek, love those who persecuted him, eat with social outcasts, and feed the very ones who would later call for his crucifixion.

And today’s youth are just as crazy. Crazy enough to pressure advertisers to stop funding the NRA, one of the largest and most powerful influences in U.S. politics. Crazy enough to squeeze the President to propose a bump stock ban. Crazy enough to imagine a world without mass shootings.

And that’s just the sort of craziness to which God calls us. It’s the realm of which Jesus spoke when he answered Pilate’s question about kingdoms and power by saying, “My realm is not of this world.” If we’re looking for God’s kingdom in the world of might-makes-right, we won’t find it. If we think for a moment that we’ll experience it among the politicians who can be bought by powerful political action committees, we need to think again.

If you’re looking for the realm of God, the worldview to which we are called, and the one which Jesus lived out, we’ll find it when we forgive the one upon whom we would most like to take our revenge. That’s where we’ll find God. We will experience God’s grace in acts of charity and spending time with people we would rather avoid. That’s the upside-down kingdom to which we are called: a kingdom and a way of living that’s nothing like the world to which we are accustomed.

So which part of Jesus’ upside-down kingdom have you stayed the farthest away from? His regular table fellowship with the least of these? His radical forgiveness and call to always turn the other cheek? His message about riches making it hard to get into heaven? His pacifism?

If you’re anything like me, you want to know and experience God, but you still want to keep a foot in the door of the world, because to know God fully means to take up your cross and to follow Jesus to the place at which we find him standing this morning in our Gospel reading. It’s just craziness. But it’s the craziness to which we’re called.

God bless the crazy ones, for theirs is the home and harbor of God. Blessed are those starved for change and parched for legal victories – for every cold call, email, rally, parade, information table, and knock on the door will be satisfied. And blessed are the peacemakers, those of long ago, today, and always, for they are the children of God. Amen.