

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, March 4, 2007

Sermon Text: Luke 13:31-35

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, I have said after preaching for some 25 years that approaching the same old Gospel text the same old way bores even me. So I look at the text, and I dig deeper, and I try to find some truth that I’ve not touched upon or some truth that hasn’t really been clear to me until now, and I’ll be preaching this text in a little bit different way. I hope in a true way, and I hope that even if it strikes you wrong or discordant, you will think about it later and try to find some new truth for yourself from God’s word. I warn you.

Herod, whom Jesus called a fox, was a politician in the worst meaning of the word, which oddly enough reminds me of a story. I’m a preacher. Everything reminds me of a story. If you’ve spent hours in a hospital waiting room with me, I know that you know.

The story is an older couple had a son, who was still living with them, and the parents were a little worried because the son had no apparent career plans at all. They decided to do a little test. They took a \$100 bill, a Bible, a bottle of whiskey, and put them on the front hall table. They hid in a closet pretending not to be home. This was the test. They were going to watch and see what the son did when he came in. There was a note there to the effect that this was some sort of a test. If the son took the money alone, then they thought, well, he might be a businessman. If he took the Bible, they thought, well, he might become a preacher. If he took the bottle of whiskey, they thought, well, he might just be self-indulgent and irresponsible. The parents hid, and they waited nervously, peeping through the keyhole, the old-fashioned closet lock door. They waited nervously, and as they watched, they saw him arrive. He took the \$100 bill. He snapped it. He held it up to the light. It looked good. He stuck it in his pocket. He took the Bible, flipped through it a couple of times. He shook his head, and took the Bible. Finally, he grabbed the bottle, and he opened it, and he took an appreciative whiff to check the quality. He took that, too. He took all three and went to his room. The father slapped himself on the forehead, and he said, “Doggone it! It’s worse than I thought. Our son is going to be a politician!”

Herod was a politician in the worst possible way. Jesus called him a sneaky, sneaky fox. You know, Jesus did not really live to win friends and influence people. He lived God’s will courageously and he let things fall where they may. You’ll remember the Jesus meek and mild we sort of picture most often, but you’ll also remember the Jesus enraged at the moneychangers in the front of the temple and as He turned that over saying, “You shall not make my Father’s house a place of commerce.”

We get confused about Jesus, and we divide Him up into larger and smaller portions of meek and mild, but in fact, and you must listen closely to what I’m saying as it’s not what we normally say about Jesus. He was a more manly man than the movie heroes, who play the parts with guns and ammo. He was a Rambo of the faith, but without guns,

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without knives. Jesus was courageous because of His faith alone; because of His absolute trust in God the Father and the Father’s will. Even when the political forces conspired mightily against Him to kill Him.

You know, the political forces asked Him, “Who’s in charge here?” Jesus at one point said, “I am. I can give my life, but you can’t take it.” They asked, “Who’s to say your sins are forgiven?” Jesus said, “I am.” They asked, “Who’s to say to a judging crowd let the one without sin cast the first stone?” Jesus said, “I am.” Who’s the one with the right to say the Father and I are one, when you have seen Me, you have seen the Father? Jesus said, “I am.”

Jesus meek and mild, not always! No, more like Jesus unafraid and unbowed, unbowed down no matter the threat, no matter the power, no matter how low His poll numbers got among the popular. He declared further, “I am the good shepherd. I am the door. I am the light of the world. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the vine. I am the bread of life. I am the resurrection and the life.”

So when Herod the Lesser, the grandson of Herod the Greater, who killed all those babies at Bethlehem trying to snuff out the baby Jesus just after His birth, when the second Herod sought to kill Him, Jesus more or less said, “Get in line. Get in line. In the meantime, I’ll be about my Father’s business.” Jesus was saying, “I will die soon enough, but it will not be Herod’s call. It will be mine, and for right now, you tell that fox.” You see, Jesus knew the score. He mourned the bloody death of His cousin, John the Baptist, but He was not going to be intimidated. You know, Herod chopped off John’s head.

Jesus knew He was a man in charge of His own destiny, and He was tough, and He was determined. He said, “You go tell that fox I’ll move on when I’m ready and not before.” Herod the Lesser was the one who married his sister-in-law while his original wife still lived, and that led John the Baptist to have his head cut off because he pointed out that his marriage was not kosher. He dared to speak the truth. Herod already acted violently and abusively to John the Baptist, and now here comes Jesus in the same mold of fearless truth teller. Of course, he was capable of killing again!

Jewish historian, Josephus, tells that Herod loved luxury and the easy life. He cherished tranquility, and any trouble that troubled his ease was heading toward the chopping block. As always, dictators don’t negotiate. They eliminate. Some Pharisees, now this was Pharisees, sought out Jesus and said to Him, “Get away from here! Herod wants to kill you!” Now, that’s an odd warning, or at least from an odd source because you remember, Pharisees were not friendly to Jesus and His followers. It seems to me that they were not being entirely honest about what they wanted. They were believing like those people who say, “Now, I don’t have any trouble with this myself, but I think you should know . . .” which usually means they do have trouble with it themselves.

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Most likely, the Pharisees just wanted Jesus gone and any old threat would do. A threat that would not come back on them because they warned Him about it. They warned Him about it. They were as free as if they had washed their hands in advance. They were going to be able to say, “We warned you! We told you!” but they didn’t really care. It was a game.

We still have games. Who’s in charge and by what threat and in whose name and what innuendo can I cause chaos for the other side without getting caught myself? Has humanity improved in over 2000 years? Not much. Not much. We still see these games being played out in families and in work places and churches and governments. I think you should know, and do you know what people are saying, and I’m only telling you this for your own good, or it’s only because I love the church so much that I.... Jesus replied, “You go and tell that fox.”

Hatred and power grabbing. These are both bad things, but they are even worse when you serve them on a plate of love with a little God and a little church on each side. Do that and you’ve crossed the line into pure evil. Jesus told the Pharisees, who insincerely warned Him and pretended to care about His safety, “You go and tell that fox.” Jesus comes close to cursing when He calls Herod a fox.

In Rabbinic literature, the fox is a low, cunning animal, and it is a low-down animal compared to other creatures. Jesus writes off Herod in that term as a third-rate politician of little or no account, a despicable ruler, whose low cunning should be watched closely, and whose authority is not even worthy of respect. He was saying a lot. Jesus was raised Himself as a Galilean peasant, and He was raised under a puppet government in a land occupied by military rulers so when He said sneaky, contemptible fox, I think Jesus used the word and He also felt the meaning of it. He called it as He saw it. He offered blessings, yes, but He had little patience with those who abused and pretended power belonged to them. Jesus was clear that true power, ultimate power belongs to God.

Sometimes we, as we follow and trust the same God Jesus trusted, we might be too nice. Now, here’s the interesting part you might talk about at lunch. Be careful, don’t misunderstand me. We sometimes avoid conflict when things are so wrong or so hurtful that to fail to speak up is more evil than to stir things up. We sometimes avoid conflict when things are so wrong or hurtful that to fail to speak up is more evil than to stir things up. I know this about myself. I don’t like the way I avoid conflict and paper over the cracks and slide away from saying clearly what I mean and act polite to people who have been hostile to me. It’s good to remember that Jesus was not always meek and mild. You can tell the truth in love. Make sure it’s the truth that there is nothing about being polite and being a doormat and letting the truth fall by the wayside.

Maybe Jesus’ model is better put this way. “I will do what I think God would have me do, and I just don’t have time to mess with you.” Maybe that’s what He was saying to the Pharisees in their pretend concern for Him. That takes strength and prayer, though, to get a certain direction. You need to be real sure that you can tell God’s will from your

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own will. Before you get forceful and verbal with it, make sure you can tell the difference, but do seek it, and do move. Staying in the same place and being polite all the time no matter what goes on around you seems sort of like, if you watch basketball, like pivoting on one foot with a basketball in your hand. You’re not dribbling. You’re not passing. You’re not shooting. You’re getting nowhere! You’re getting nowhere!

Better the way of Joshua, and maybe this is sort of what Jesus was saying, the way of Joshua where he said, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” You do what you want. I won’t condemn it, but I will serve the Lord in my way in my house, and I don’t have time for you.

Take a direction! Take a shot! Make a pass! Do something for God! Take a stand, a direction and move! That is what Jesus did, and yes, He cared deeply. He was a man of compassion, but also a man of passion. He lamented over Jerusalem. He wanted to lift them up. He wanted to protect them as a hen does her chicks under her wings, but they just wouldn’t have it. Like Herod, they thought that they could make it alone. Like Herod, they thought they could do it under their own power, and that means God is optional.

God is never optional. Government, power, money, culture, pleasure, we take those things, and sometimes we think they are enough, but that would mean that God is optional, and God is never optional. Jesus rejected all of those, and He railed against Herod, and He asserted His own autonomy, His own independence. He would not be manipulated by the Pharisees. He would not be run off by Herod. He ran His own race without seeking permission from anyone.

You know, I did not agree completely, many of you read the book, The Purpose Driven Life. I did not agree 100% with what I saw at times as confused theology in certain places, but I did find in the book, The Purpose Driven Life, one thing. I do believe in the premise. You do, we each do, have a purpose, and it is not simply to play nice. It is not simply to accumulate power. It is not simply to gain prestige over time and then die without ever making so much as a wave. You are a person of dignity, a person of freedom, a person made in the image of God, and you have a will of your own, and you have choices of your own to make. The Kingdom of God, which Jesus brought, means that things don’t have to stay the way they are forever. They can change. You can change. I can change. The church can change and grow.

Change and growth for good are always possible. The question is, how do you want the rest of your life to be? Follow Jesus, and you will be brave. Follow Jesus, and you must be brave. You’ll care more what God thinks than what others think. As you trust God, you will be brave. God will be your strength, your guide, and your comforter. God will ultimately be your judge. Let us never care too much what others think. Amen.