

## **“Facing Opposition and Doing it Anyway”**

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew’s United Church  
on June 3, 2018 at 10:30 a.m. (Second Sunday after Pentecost)  
Scripture Readings: I Samuel 3:1-10; Mark 2:23 - 3:5  
(The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

When one has a cause worth identifying with, one follows through on it no matter what the fall out. The life and ministry of Jesus is filled with incidents where he carried on in spite of the opposition he faced from religious leaders and devout believers.

If you think about it, much of life is moved forward when people stand up for what they see is right and not be discouraged when they face opposition from others, even powerful people, because they are not going to be intimidated to do what is popular or safe rather than what is right and just.

Annie B. was chosen to be on a cheer-dance team for her high school. She was excited to make this fairly exclusive club after her audition, but she and her parents had concerns about what was expected by the participants. She and her mom sat down with the school principal and coach before she accepted the position on the team, explaining that she felt uncomfortable about some of the dance moves, and she and her mom suggested they go against the school’s policy on appropriate behaviour. They deemed them too “suggestive.” If the cheer-dance team simply followed the rules of the school on personal behaviour, she felt she could meet her own value system and also be on the team.

It was a challenge, and further meetings took place with the coach during the year, but in the end both team and Annie stayed together. She was glad she spoke up, even though some of her team mates wondered why she was so difficult and not willing to do whatever was asked of her. She felt she stood her ground for what was right for her and for the team.

No less an authority than Albert Einstein is quoted as saying: “What is right is not always popular, and what is popular is not always right.”

St. Augustine was starker in putting the same truth out to the world: “Right is right even if no one is doing it, and wrong is wrong even if everyone is doing it.”

And so Jesus challenged the rules of the Sabbath in his time. These were strict. People could not work on the Sabbath. That meant preparing a meal or walking too far was “work,” and so people prepared meals ahead, or hired neighbouring gentiles to cook for them on the Sabbath. That applies to strict observers even today. Go into Mount Sinai hospital and there is a “Sabbath” elevator so that you do not even have to push a button for the floor you want when attending a hospital room on the Sabbath. Synagogues were plentiful in major Middle East cities, and Jews would congregate in a neighbourhood in any modern city so that they could attend synagogue and not be forced to walk too far. That is reflected in old neighbourhoods and new, even in Toronto.

And Jesus had the perfect answer to such rules. Not to ridicule or dismiss those who held onto such rules, but asked the basic question: “What should we do on the Sabbath – that

which helps people, or that which harms them?” You see his ethic was based on caring for people, and so he acted with that premise in mind.

No wonder when he summarized the law and prophets he said we must love God, and love our neighbour. End of Story.

That was what motivated Sarah Devenny as a teenager. When she was 19, she worked in a nursing home caring for patients who were predominantly suffering from Alzheimer’s. As she put it, this is a truly heartbreaking illness to watch. And anyone who has a loved suffering from that disease, or has suffered from that disease in the past, understands what she means.

At the same time, Sarah writes that working at that home was the only time in her life when she can truly say that she loved her job – she absolutely loved it. She felt that she was doing something to help people, and was making a difference in other people’s lives. Those residents opened her eyes, and helped her to become more compassionate and understanding. They had the most incredible stories of love, heartbreak, poverty, and everything in between.

She saw it as an honour to take care of these people, to provide them with dignity in the years that lie before them, but apparently not everyone viewed their role as she did. There was one “nurse” whom Sarah felt did not do justice to the profession, or even to the human race. She would mock, demean, and bully residents. She would be physically rough with them and degrade them.

“As soon as I realised that this was a regular occurrence, and being someone who cannot keep her mouth shut (at least before thinking through what I want to say), I immediately went to my supervisor to explain my concern.” Little did Sarah know about the politics of the work place, nor did she realise this nurse was distantly related to the supervisor. The supervisor listened, but Sarah knew her intervention was in vain.

That night Sarah discussed the concern she had with her mother, also a nurse, and asked her what she should do. Her mother said “I think you already know what to do Sarah, and I would encourage you to do it, but it will have consequences. You may lose your job by standing up for what you see as the right action, but you can always get another job, and your conscience will be clear.”

The next day Sarah went to work early and spoke with the owner of the home, relating her concerns and the events of the day before. The owner took notes as if to suggest that she was concerned and listening intently, but Sarah knew it was a ruse.

She quit on the spot, telling the owner she would not be working out her notice period, and if the owner wanted to sue her for lack of notice then she would be prepared to meet her in court. She walked out and that was the last contact she had with anyone from the home. She could not work in a place which was so far from her own values as a person.

Abuse of the elderly is a too common issue today, yet it is encouraging when a teenager – when anyone – speaks up for those without the ability to speak up for themselves.

Is that not what Jesus was doing – speaking up for those who could not speak up for themselves? He was not interested in dismissing the leaders of the day or judging those in authority, but he wanted to make sure that those in authority understood that their power, and their responsibilities, came from God, and include compassion and concern for others.

Sarah learned several months later that the nurse in question lost her job eventually when the family of a resident noticed she was abusing another resident.

Sarah says she learned that in life you should not wait until you are harmed or victimized yourself before you speak up for others who have been victims. Your conscience will be clear and you will feel good that you did all that you could.

We hear a lot today in many circles about “fake news.” It seems that people have determined their position on many issues not based on facts or news but based on their own beliefs and suspicions. That was true long before the “fake news” supporters got their way in some media.

A study in 2015 published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology displayed the slippery way that people can get away from facts when the facts contradict their basic beliefs. Of course sometimes people dispute the basic validity of certain facts. But the study found that at other times people go one step further and reframe an issue in untestable ways, where potentially important facts and scientific data ultimately become irrelevant to the issue at hand.

One example was the widespread affirmation that “Vaccinations cause autism – a medical study proved that.” It turns out, if you have been following this long debated issue, that the medical researcher who came up with those conclusions lost his license due to faulty research methodology, and many newer studies have proven there is no correlation to vaccinations and autism, so people who hold that position move to saying: “Well, at least as a parent I have the right to determine whether or not my child gets vaccinated.” The latter statement is true, but is not in any way related to the first affirmation of vaccinations and autism. They stand alone as two separate issues, but the argument has conflated the two issues into one.

Jesus did not say in addressing the Sabbath: “Religious practices and rules are silly and dumb. We should forget about them.” That would have been a challenging statement from one many deemed as Messiah, but we do not have to deal with it – it never happened.

What he did say was: “Establish rules that have meaning, that show God is front and centre in our beliefs and actions, and concern for our neighbour drives what we ultimately decide to do.”

Jesus never wanted to please those in authority if he felt they were not in line with what is a respectful and neighbourly thing to do. He never wavered from that principle. He also never gave up even though there must have been times he felt the struggle was long and the results so far in the distance he might not succeed.

No matter what he faced, Jesus never gave up.

That is why I am going to break my rule about not speaking about the election of this week, aside from a small comment I made early in the campaign that it is a difficult decision we all must make, and voting is paramount.

You see, I already voted in the advance poll. I am a life-long resident of Ontario and deserve a vote, but as of Thursday my address has disappeared in Sudbury, and I cannot travel to my new home to vote this week with so much happening, and I yet to have any government issued identification with that new address (other than an insurance policy) so I voted advance poll. I made my choice. I thought we had three main parties and a variety of other candidates from which to choose. All had put their name forward and were seeking support in order to make a difference in government.

Now yesterday the premier has said "I know I cannot win the election."

How does she know? Polls indicate she is far behind, but her handlers and campaign staff suggest she is rebounding and doing better after the last debate. How does she know? Polls indicate she is mired in third place.

But polls do not vote, people do. One of the great political truths I learned as a campaigner in my teens is that: "Signs do not vote; people do."

So here is the corollary of that adage: "Polls do not vote, people do." Here I am a person who voted advance poll, making what I thought was a wise decision based on the choices, and one of the leaders has effectively quit before my vote has even been counted. Quit. Backed out. Dismissed herself and her campaign, and left her candidates in limbo.

Now the Premier happened to be an active member of the United Church (her partner has done major work with the church in the restructuring plans that came to the last General Council, of which Phil spoke this morning), yet if I was her minister I would be making an appointment and suggesting to her she failed the province, failed her followers, even failed those who opposed her, for they wanted people to make a choice based on commitment and energy for the job of Premier, and she failed miserably by quitting before the election.

Kathleen Wynne may deny that is what she did, but that is how I heard it.

Jesus said and did many controversial things, but when things got difficult, his resolve was even stronger. He never lacked for commitment as well as compassion, insight as well as realism. He was adamant as to what was right, and he may have planned for the worst (after all, he knew his own death was around the corner when he supped with his disciples), but while he planned for the worst, he continually offered the best he had.

Jesus knew that he would face opposition, but if he was clear as to what was right, it was worth doing even if people were against him.

Had the Premier said something like, "I sense the electorate are going in a different direction, but let me be clear – I will continue to fight for the values and attitudes in government that I think are important," I would have no beef with her position. I may agree or disagree with her, but I would respect her integrity and commitment. But I read

all of the emails I have received from her advisors and cohorts, all of the news coverage I have perused, all of the pundits' comments as simply fake news. The real news is: "I am in this election for the long haul, or until five days before the election, whichever comes first."

I am not even trying to suggest who you should vote for. Each candidate as leader still has flaws, and each candidate locally still has different attributes to acknowledge, support, or question. But if we had candidates who followed in the spiritual call that Jesus showed, they would without question seek to do what is right every day they are candidates or office holders, and never give up.

Maybe that is an unfair standard, but it is one we have a right to expect from people in any profession or calling in life.

And as believers, no matter what example our leaders provide, we need to pray for them and let them know that we will not give up on our fellow citizens.

When it is important to do and to act, even though we might face opposition, we should do it anyway.