

Tough Minds and Tender Hearts

Romans 12:1-2; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 10:16

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, (March 17) 2024

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Do you remember where you were four years ago? Four years ago the Covid lockdown began. Four years ago was our first Sunday without gathering in-person for worship. Instead, we broadcast it online, learning as we went. Perhaps you were hunkered down at home in your pajamas with a cup of coffee watching a screen of us putting on a service while we were looking at an empty sanctuary with only a camera on a tripod in front of us.

I remember the week preceding the lockdown I attended the local Ministerial Alliance where we talked about Covid and the rumors of some churches in the larger cities considering shutting down in-person worship and going online. In about 4 days the conversation among clergy went from casual speculation to definitive decisions and plans. It was dizzying how fast we changed to online-only worship. It was dizzying how fast the entire country went into lockdown and social distancing and hoarding toilet paper.

I use the word “dizzying” because our already anxious lives were suddenly upended. At first, it seemed a relief. A chance to sleep and rest and recover. People seemed to be kinder and more thoughtful the few times we encountered someone else. From a safe distance, we would say, “Be safe” to each other. We thought that it all might last only a few days or a few weeks, but it kept going. After a few months, scientists noticed ecosystems were recovering, air pollution in the major cities all but disappeared.

Mixed messages from Washington with the President advocating quirky, quacky, crazy remedies quickly turned the pandemic into a political issue and not just a public health issue. Businesses closed, people were laid off, stores were empty, the roads were empty, the list of deaths on the obituary page grew, hospitals were full, and we all found ourselves locked down with just our immediate family or sometimes isolated by ourselves.

After several weeks or months locked down, some of our family systems began to crack and break from the intensified pressure without relief and with no other outlets within a wider community. I've read, America leads the world in anxiety, both social and personal, and that was before Covid. Furthermore, family systems studies say no anxious system can handle more than three to five issues at a time and here we were overflowing with issues. How many were we attempting to handle?

Anyone want to go back to four years ago?

Charles Dickens begins his 1859 novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, with these famous words, *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way ...*

Dickens words about the paradoxical times were written for the late 1700's but they could easily fit 2020. And they could fit today. ... They could also fit the first century and our reading from Matthew 10.

Matthew 10 is a strange chapter – at least to me. Matthew begins with listing all twelve of the original disciples or as we soon see, the twelve apostles, because an apostle is one who is sent out. In Matthew 10 Jesus is sending out the twelve on a kind of dress rehearsal, a practice run of what they’ll be doing in the future: going out healing sick people, casting out demons, and setting people free from the chains of Sin and Death that are choking them. That all sounds exciting and exhilarating, and it is.

Yet, most of the chapter is Jesus warning these new apostles of the challenges they’ll be facing and how they need to prepare themselves: stick to the Jews on this mission trip. Leave the Gentiles and Samaritans alone. Travel light – don’t take money, don’t pack any extra clothes or sandals. You’ll be cared for and fed along the way (you hope!). Be prepared because a lot of people will not receive you and might run you out of town. That’s okay. It goes with the job. If they won’t receive you, just turn around and leave. Be ready, too, for the days are coming when you will be arrested and flogged and be brought before both political and religious authorities. You’ll be thrown in jail and brought before governors and kings because of me. Don’t worry what to say because the Holy Spirit will give you the words to say. You’ll be betrayed by people you trusted and it’s going to be tough.

“Look, I’m sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves. So be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16).

I’ve long wondered about this enigmatic statement from Jesus. What does it mean to be wise or shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves? Whatever it means, Jesus is certainly giving the apostles paradoxical instructions.

Martin Luther King has been very helpful here. Dr. King pointed out that the dissonance we feel when we hear Jesus' words are exactly what Jesus wants us to feel. He said, "We must combine the toughness of the serpent and the softness of the dove, a tough mind and a tender heart" (King, *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings*, p.2).

A tough mind involves, Dr. King said, "incisive thinking, realistic appraisal, and decisive judgement. The tough mind is sharp and penetrating, breaking through the crust of legends and myths, and sifting the true from the false. The tough-minded individual is astute and discerning. He (or she) has a strong, austere quality that makes for firmness of purpose and solidness of commitment" (p.2).

Tough-minded people are thoughtful, which takes me back to last week's sermon on thoughtlessness (or stupidity) as the banality of evil. Hannah Arendt's observation about how one could participate in the great evil of the Nazi Holocaust by not thinking. People like Adolph Eichmann could plan logistics and organize train schedules and not care and not think about that the trains were transporting Jews to the death camps and gas chambers.

Tough-minded people ask questions, and they don't take "no" for an answer and they certainly don't give up just because someone in authority says something like, "Don't worry. We'll take care of it." Or "That's none of your business." Tough-minded people listen. So when someone is spouting off online or in the barber shop or on TV about America is a Christian nation, Christians must take back America, and we must stop the invasion of immigrants from across the Rio Grande, we listen and learn to ask questions. We are not taken in and are not silent when we hear politicians say migrants are less than human. "In some cases, they're not people, in my opinion," which is what Trump said yesterday in Ohio.

We ask, where is Jesus Christ in all this? What does Jesus say about our neighbors and the least of these, and even what does Jesus say about those we consider enemies? We listen to whether the Christianity that is being espoused has more to do with cultural or social identity than it does with following Jesus and seeking to live and act like Jesus. Does it have to do with social power and guns, or does it have to do with serving and mercy and grace? Does it have more to do with wrapping themselves in the flag than it does serving the hungry, the left-out, and the down-and-out.

Tough-minded people do their homework and work patiently and know that if we adopt and sponsor immigrant families it's going to cost money and time and effort, and it might even cost more. But if we have prayed long and hard, asked a lot of questions, and then concluded that this is what Christ Jesus calls us to do, then we must do it.

Tough-minded people are serious about the Apostle Paul's call to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). And Paul goes on to say, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (12:21). Therefore, we can see through the illusions and spectacles and seek the truth and develop critical-thinking skills and we are committed to learning these skills and teaching them to our children.

When Paul says in Philippians that we are to "let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus" and goes on to explain that Christ gave up power rather than trying to seize it or trying to hold onto it, tough-minded people know that's our calling and that's how we learn to think (see Philippians 2:5).

Tough-minded people know how to sit down and talk to each other and listen to one another, and how to hold one another accountable and encourage one another. Tough-minded people know how to forgive and receive forgiveness.

But Jesus says that if we're going out in the middle of a hostile, chaotic, and anxiety-ridden world, we're going to need more than simply being tough-minded. We're also going to need to be gentle and tender-hearted. Dr. King put it this way: Toughmindedness without tenderheartedness is cold and detached, leaving one's life in a perpetual winter devoid of the warmth of spring and the gentle heat of summer. ... The hardhearted person never truly loves. He (or she) engages in a crass utilitarianism which values other people mainly according to their usefulness to him (or her). He/she never experiences the beauty of friendship, because he (or she) is too cold to feel affection for another and is too self-centered to share another's joy and sorrow. He (or she) is an isolated island. No outpouring of love links him (or her) with the mainland of humanity" (*Gift of Love*, p.5).

King said that even when we are challenged, we are called to remember gentleness. He went on, "God has two outstretched arms. One is strong enough to surround us with justice, and one is gentle enough to embrace us with love. ... I am thankful that we worship a God who is both tough-minded and tender-hearted" (p. 8).

Let's linger here for a moment. In the 17th century, Sir Isaac Newton believed that atoms were the smallest bits of matter and the building blocks of everything. Each atom occupied its own space and all atoms obeyed the same laws. For Newton the world was fixed and predictable.

Newton's model became the paradigm for all society. Individuals were considered to be the atoms of society, and unchanging principles and institutions

were the means to keep everyone in their place and the separate parts intact. For example, Freud's psychology of relationship was based upon Newtonian concepts, with every person isolated and unknowable. No one can know another person but each projects something of himself or herself onto the other.

Western education followed this same Newtonian approach, dividing knowledge into discrete parts (for example, reading, writing, and arithmetic). Schools teach subjects and have departments. Students major in a special field to become expert in one field of knowledge. Even to this day, interdisciplinary studies are rare.

The world of business divided production into assembly lines where each worker did one discrete action over and over. Companies divided themselves into subdivisions for sales, research, finance, and production.

Western medicine thought in much the same way, human beings were broken down into parts, the human body a collection of separate elements with medical specialists attending to one body part or section.

But all this is changing. It's not that there is no such thing as individual parts or atoms, it's that it is not so simple and it's not the whole story. Quantum physics emerged about a hundred years ago and showed us another way of thinking. Atoms are not the smallest unit in the universe, untouched by or unaffected by others. Instead, we have learned that everything is connected in one way or another. Everything is related.

It is why I want my primary care physician to be in conversation with my specialist doctors. Dr. Eric is in conversation with Dr. Armstrong in Tyler, my urologist, and both are in conversation with Dr. Mary Hebert, the radiation

oncologist. Dr. Eric looks at the whole person and is aware of my history, my context, and so on. He's aware that all of me is connected.

Why this digression? Because our calling as followers of Christ is to make connections. Quantum physics is simply bearing out what we Christians have long known: that we are all part of God's creation, and in God's plan we all fit together in relationship and community.

About the same time I first became a pastor, writer Norman Cousins wrote a book about his being sick. What the book is best known for was his advocacy of using humor and laughter in countering illness. But what I remember was his statement to doctors that when they entered the patient's room to remember that the main distance is not from the door to the bed but from the physician's eyes to the patient's. "That distance is best traveled when you bend low to the patient's fear of loneliness and pain and the overwhelming sense of mortality that comes flooding out of the unknown, and when your hand on the patient's shoulder or arm is a shelter against darkness" (see *Anatomy of an Illness*).

I learned very quickly that that advice was not only for doctors, but it was imperative for a pastor. And I'm telling you this morning, it is essential for each of us and all of us. Tough-minded and tender-hearted people know that we are all connected in relationship. That's what Austin Heights does – we help make connections and relationships. In a broken and divided world, we help bring wholeness and healing.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.