

“EXIT STRATEGY”
Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-28
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
August 20, 2017

The term “exit strategy” is something we normally associate with military operations. For at least a decade, U.S. commanders and politicians have been trying to devise ways to remove American troops from Afghanistan. Their exit strategy entails getting U.S. soldiers out of harm’s way without totally abandoning those we seek to support.

But notice: much closer to home, you and I devise exit strategies in our everyday activities. Have you ever been invited to a social event which you anticipated to be lengthy and tedious, and plotted ahead of time about how you could make an early departure? “Please excuse me, but I have a terrible headache” . . . “Sorry to leave so soon, but I need to walk my dog before bedtime.” You know the drill!

In the 15th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus calls for a completely different kind of “exit strategy.” The context is a debate between Jesus and the Pharisees about the food laws of Judaism. The underlying issue is: What kinds of actions lead to an impure, unholy life; and conversely, what kinds of actions produce a life that is pleasing to God? Well, the Pharisees believe that holiness hinges in large measure on how and what a person eats. They insist that eating with unclean hands and eating unclean food results in a contamination of the soul. One must wash properly and eat only prescribed food in order to acquire holiness. Jesus counters by saying that what enters the stomach is far less important than what exits the heart and mouth, so an “exit strategy” is required to control what we say and do and thereby create a holy life.

Now, to be totally fair and accurate, we have no indication here that Jesus simply dismisses the Jewish food laws as wrong-headed and outmoded. He has the good judgment to realize that what we put into our mouths can cause us great harm. You and I exercise similar good judgment today. We know that if we don’t wash our hands before we eat, we’re going to mix germs and viruses with our food; if we eat nothing but French fries and ice cream, we’re going to have clogged arteries; if we consume spoiled food; we’re going to get sick; if we ingest poison, we’re going to die. To a considerable degree, “we are what we eat.” That familiar phrase has a wider application, of course. We are all consumers, and if you and I consume a steady diet of ugly violence and abrasive politics on TV – not to mention trivia and rubbish on our Smart phones and the Internet – we are destined to become what we consume.

So Jesus doesn’t seek to abolish the food laws of Judaism; rather, he seeks to put them into proper perspective. He knows that what we put into our mouths and hearts is important; but here he is more concerned with what comes out of our mouths and hearts. Jesus notes that these two body parts are intimately connected. “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and that is what defiles,” he says. “For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile” (Matthew 15:18-20). Again, Jesus is suggesting that we need an “exit strategy” – a way of purifying what exits from our mouths and hearts.

Friends, I cannot think of a teaching that could be more timely and telling in the wake of the tragedy that occurred a week ago yesterday in Charlottesville, Virginia. A motley group of Alt-Righters, white supremacists, white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and Ku Klux Klan members converged on that Southern city with their hearts full of evil intentions and their mouths full of slander, and the end result was murder. A young woman was killed and many others were injured by a man who idolized Adolph Hitler and hated the counter-protestors and all they stood for.

How ironic that today's designated psalm speaks of the blessedness of being a united people: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity" (Psalm 133:1). The psalmist may have in mind the bonding of families, or the harmony of religious communities, or even the reunification of the Israelite people who are divided into twelve tribes and two kingdoms. Well, make no mistake about it: the thugs who descended upon Charlottesville also have a vision for national unity. They seek an America that is all-white and totally segregated from the real world – a "pure" America that excludes Jews and Muslims and people of color. And they are willing to say and do anything to bring about this narrow unity.

Perhaps the greater tragedy of Charlottesville is that what happened there is just an extreme example of a soul sickness that pervades much of our country today. After all, evil intentions, words, and actions are not the exclusive property of neo-Nazis. One sees evidence that they are also present in an increasing number of mainstream Americans.

I made a quick return visit to the Chautauqua Institution in western New York this past Monday. The lecturer that afternoon was Michael Gerson, a columnist for the Washington Post who served as the main speech-writer for President George W. Bush. Gerson is a card-carrying conservative Republican in the mold of the Bush family. You may not be surprised that he pulled no punches in critiquing the current administration for what he calls its lack of "moral clarity."

But Michael Gerson didn't come to Chautauqua to bash Donald Trump. His greater concern was the polarization of the American people as a whole. Gerson says that we are not simply divided into two political parties with competing views of government; we are divided into multiple "tribes," each with its own values and vision and agenda. The tribes are made up of special interest groups – the white majority and ethnic minorities, men and women, straights and gays, city slickers and country folks, business executives and factory workers, religious evangelicals and religious liberals. In this contentious atmosphere, everyone within one's own tribe is regarded as a friend; everyone outside one's own tribe is viewed as an enemy. Moreover, the members of each tribe live in what Michael Gerson calls a "cocoon," talking only to people with whom they agree and insulating themselves from those with opposing points of view. The result is a lack of genuine dialogue and understanding, a heightening of heated rhetoric, and a desire to defeat other tribes at all costs. In today's "culture wars," the winner takes all.

Michael Gerson believes this polarization in American society will be extremely difficult to overcome. But he himself is an evangelical Christian, and he has a prescription for what ails us that is grounded in biblical faith. In fact, what struck me is how closely Gerson's blueprint for a healthier, more unified America reflects the teachings of the New Testament.

For starters, Gerson says that all responsible citizens – and Christians in particular – need to recognize evil for what it is, refer to it by that term, and resist it with all our moral energy. A healthy society is a tolerant society, but we can be tolerant only up to a point. In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus identifies specific actions which “defile” the people who do them and also harm other people, and he doesn’t hesitate to call these actions “evil.” And so today, Neo-Nazis are children of God like the rest of us, but they are misguided children of God, and what they are saying and doing is evil. Racial hatred and bigotry have no place even in a “free” society and especially in communities of faith. You and I must brand these attitudes and actions as evil, and we must resist them accordingly.

At the same time, Gerson believes there is plenty of room for the American people to dialogue with one another, to be in meaningful contact with those who are not evil, but who are merely different in background or outlook. You and I can’t do this in a “cocoon” where we are talking and listening only to people who think like we do and who just reinforce our own biases; we have to be in conversation with people who are “other” – whose skin color, economic status, and political persuasion are different from ours.

Let me confess my own tendency to look at the world from inside a cocoon. I have a college degree and six years of graduate theological education. I have lived mostly in cosmopolitan cities and suburbs. I’m a white male in a white collar profession. As a Methodist minister, I’m guaranteed a job as long as I demonstrate competence and keep my nose clean. As a Christian I tend to support changes that make our society more accepting of diversity and more welcoming to all people, including immigrants and refugees.

However, after hearing Michael Gerson last Monday, I’m now asking myself, “Do I really understand the concerns of fellow Americans who are not like me – people who have less education; who live in a small town or the remote countryside; who earn their livelihood in factories or on farms; who have lost their jobs due to downsizing or outsourcing; who feel that they have been left behind by an insensitive government, a changing culture, and a compromising Church? Have I really made an effort to listen to the hopes and fears of these people?” The honest answer is “No.” I listen almost exclusively to my own inner voice and the voices of others whose experience is like mine.

Today’s Epistle lesson from Romans reflects a time when the early Church is experiencing radical change and debating some very tough questions. The first Christians are Jews who confess Jesus as the Messiah. How then should the Church regard Jews who reject Jesus? Do they remain God’s chosen people? Are they still included in God’s plan of salvation? And, are Jews who do convert to Christianity obligated to keep observing the Jewish law? To make matters even more complicated, the second generation of Christians encompasses Gentiles. Do Gentiles even belong in a Church whose Lord is the Jewish Messiah? Should Gentiles be required to become observant Jews before they become disciples of Jesus Christ?

The apostle Paul is caught in the middle of these controversies, but in the providence of God he is perfectly suited to mediate them. He is a Jew by background, so he empathizes with his fellow Jews and affirms that they are still God’s covenant people. He is also a native of Gentile territory, the port city of Tarsus in Asia Minor, so he empathizes with Gentiles who are surprising everybody by converting to Christianity. He asserts that Gentiles can become

Christians without first adhering to the rituals of Judaism; and after some sensitive negotiating, this principle is eventually affirmed by the whole Church.

Do you see what's happening here? Paul doesn't live in a religious or cultural cocoon; he lives in an open space where he can be in dialogue with all parties in a complex situation. He has his own convictions, to be sure; but he also has respect for the convictions of others. Friends, I believe this is where you and I are called to live – in a place where we can listen to people who are different, seek to understand them, and develop empathy for their points of view – even if we still disagree with them.

And then, Michael Gerson suggests one final path toward a more peaceful, unified America. He says that each one of us needs to exercise humility and engage in healthy self-criticism. All too often, you and I are prone to criticize the attitudes and actions of others, without looking in the mirror and noticing our own blind spots and blemishes. At the political level, Gerson points out that when Democrats and Republicans continue to blame each other for our country's woes, no progress is ever made. It is only when Democrats and Republicans admit their own failings and take corrective measures that positive change becomes possible. At the personal level, it's almost reflexive that we find fault in others before we find fault in ourselves. But you and I can grow as persons only when we recognize our own short-sightedness and catch a larger vision of what we can be.

This brings us back to the 15th chapter of Matthew, which begins with Jesus attacking the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. In today's lesson, he broadens his attack to include those who defile themselves with evil intentions, words, and deeds. These are "fighting words" coming from the lips of the Prince of Peace! But then, in the next section of this chapter, Jesus says and does something that seems to be even more harsh and judgmental, something that appears to contradict his own primary message of love and inclusiveness. He moves into Gentile territory and is confronted by a Canaanite woman – that is, a non-Jew – who begs him to heal her daughter. To this woman's plea for mercy, Jesus is at first silent. Then the disciples say, "Send her away," she is a nuisance to us (v. 21). When Jesus does speak, he tells her that his ministry is "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v. 24). The woman repeats her plea, falling on her knees before Jesus. Again, Jesus puts up an obstacle, saying it is not fair to give the children's bread to the dogs (v. 26). Imagine that: he is likening this Canaanite woman to a household pet! Her final response is to say in effect, "Then treat me as a dog and let me have the crumbs that fall from the table." At this display of tenacious trust, Jesus commends her faith and heals her daughter (v. 28).

All of this seems totally out of character for Jesus, whom we normally view as one who breaks down barriers and accepts everyone. Commentators on this text make various attempts to relieve the story of its embarrassment. Some say it reflects Matthew's bias as a Jewish Christian. Only three times in this Gospel does Jesus minister to outsiders; only after the resurrection does Christ commission his followers to preach to all nations (28:18-20). Other interpreters say that Jesus is bringing the woman to an appropriate humility. Still others say that he is testing the woman's faith.

But is it possible that Jesus is putting himself to the test here? Might he be engaging in an act of self-criticism and self-correction? A lot of Christians assume that Jesus springs from Mary's womb fully-grown, perfect, and complete. They would cringe at the notion that Jesus

has to enlarge his mind and change his behavior like the rest of us. But isn't this exactly what is happening in this story? It's as if Jesus is saying, "My primary mission is to fellow Jews. But here is a Gentile with a legitimate need and a genuine faith that should be rewarded. So I will expand my agenda and extend to this woman the same mercy I am offering to my own people."

This sounds more like the Jesus you and I know and seek to follow. Whenever he is confronted with a choice between following custom and demonstrating compassion, compassion always wins out. But this is possible only because he has the honesty and courage to criticize his own assumptions and take corrective measures. He employs an "exit strategy" to ensure that what comes out of his heart and mouth is consistent with the will of God.

Friends, how much more should we!