

Sermon

SET YOUR FACE TO...ACTION

Hope Church
September 13, 2009
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"Do you understand the charge against you?"

"Yes, I do. But I said and did nothing to intentionally offend the tenets of Islam." He spoke slowly, wanting to pronounce each word correctly in the local dialect.

"You are not permitted to defend yourself," shouted one of the university deans. "You are here to understand why it is you are facing 10 years in prison and to learn what happens to infidels who spread lies about religion among idealistic students."

Leaning forward in his chair to deliver his vitriolic remarks, the dean did little to hide his hatred for the professor and the other two Christians who taught in the predominantly Muslim university in Asia.

There was little doubt in the professor's mind that the dean was the one who had gone to the Islamic leadership of the city and filed the charges against them. Ten years in a foreign prison. The very real possibility of that struck him with a force that made it difficult to breathe. He felt as if the room was closing in and at any moment he might faint.

Why was this happening? He had left a successful career in the United States as a police officer to follow God into full-time missions, and where does he find himself? Facing prison. The irony of the situation pained him.

"May I be permitted to say something?"

An audible gasp escaped from several in the room The professor recognized the speaker as the newly appointed dean of the teacher training division of the university. ..."As most of you know, I have just completed my Ph.D. from a university in the United States and am now a dean."

The man spoke with perfect English when announcing his laudable accomplishment, in an effort, the professor surmised, to establish his right to refute the accusing dean. The florid cheeks of the other proved he had been effective.

"When I arrived in the United States as a new student, I was accompanied by my wife and daughter. As you can guess, I was terrified and my English was not very good. Then one evening, two young men knocked on my door. Without even waiting for me to speak, they told me they understood how difficult it was coming from another country and not understanding the culture and language. They said they would take me around campus and show my wife where to shop and help me in any way they could. And they did. Those two men saved my career, and they didn't even know who I was."

"And then," he continued after a brief pause, "you know what they did? They invited me to a Bible study. They were Christians. And I went to the study with them every Wednesday night for three years."

The room was completely still. The professor held his breath. What was the newly appointed dean doing?

"Now, isn't it the dream of every professor and dean in this room to attend and obtain a graduate degree from a foreign university? I'll tell you who will help you. People, Christian people, like this."

He pointed a slender finger in my direction and when our eyes met, I detected the slightest hint of a smile. "What does it tell them about our faith, if we put them in jail when they're here?"

The meeting was adjourned.

Journalist, Author and Missionary Jaime Winship, wrote this story in an article he titled, *Surprise Witness*, "When I think of those two college students, two people I will never know this side of glory, I am reminded that no act of obedience to God is ever trivial. My life was protected because those two young men weren't too tired or too busy {or too private or too liberal} to knock on the door of a needy Muslim neighbor, and share the love of Christ." -*Jamie Winship, "Surprise witness," Christian Reader, November/December 2000.*

Beloved, to be glad instruments of God's love in this imperfect world is the service to which we are called. One of my favorite hymn texts by Jane Parker Huber starts like this:

Called as partners in Christ's service, called to ministries of grace
We respond with deep commitment, Fresh new lines of faith to trace.
May we learn the act of sharing, side by side and friend with friend,
Equal partners in our caring, to fulfill God's chosen end.

We are called to be partners in Christ's service. And of course the gospel message, Jesus' lessons and Jesus' actions teach us how to do service and how to be partners along the way.

This year we are learning from the gospel of Mark. Unlike Luke, Mark does not have a wide-ranging compilation of Jesus' parables. Unlike John, Mark doesn't record lengthy dialogues between Jesus and others followed by even longer monologues by Jesus. In contrast to the other gospels, Mark typically offers a "rapid-fire" sequencing of Jesus' actions. Jesus heals. Jesus exorcises. Jesus calms a sea. Jesus interacts with individuals. In Mark, the wisdom of the God whom Jesus has come to reveal takes shape in the power Jesus exercises to save – which is simply a religious way of saying, the power Jesus exercises to do what is good.

Another feature of Mark's gospel, even at the outset, is the movement of Jesus. Mark has Jesus going from here to there and then in another direction, sometimes in a seemingly random pattern. The movement is primarily in Galilee in the first half of the gospel.

But the second half of the gospel, has a single direction in mind: Jerusalem. That direction is one of both geography and spirit. And the gospel "hinges" on Peter's confession of Jesus as "Christ," right here in today's text. From here on, the geography and theology move toward Jerusalem. We heard in verse 31 the first of Mark's three "passion predictions" that point to Jesus' suffering in Jerusalem.

In Luke, we hear this language "he set his face to Jerusalem." This expresses the drive and the determination that compelled Jesus to move forward without delay to his calling – despite the fact that for him his calling meant his death. This is the same kind of language as if we were to say, "He squared his jaw," or "he gritted his teeth." It is reflective of the power of conviction.

Jesus knows what is ahead, and he is going through with it. Jerusalem, here we come! He could not turn back, he could not turn away, even when he had doubts, even when he was afraid, he was propelled forward, to his calling, to Jerusalem. He set his face with passion—to his passion.

I could not help but connect that image to where we are at Hope Church. You are at a hinge point. You are turning, setting yourselves toward your mission field. You are determined to move forward toward that to which God has called you: to be a prophetic, progressive, Open and Affirming protestant presence in Boston; sharing the gospel of God's amazing grace in a new way, in a unique way, in a welcoming way, in a Hope-ful way.

I preached about this a couple of months ago. While we needed to be there for a time, so that you might heal and recover and find your calling again-- the time for internal focus -- is over. The time for paying attention only to what we need and only what we want -- is finished. The time to set your face to others, to those who have not yet found the love of God is nigh. The time to set your face to the thing that you were create to do and be is now. The time to set your face to your calling is upon us.

And clarity about what that is, what it is that Hope Church is called to be and do is yours—you already have it. The truth is, you have always had it – for our calling is given to us by the Holy Spirit as soon we gather as the Body of Christ. But through your search process and through the wonderful work you have done in discerning about a union with Central Congregational and the move back to Jamaica Plain, I have seen a laser like clarity about Hope Church’s mission and Hope Church’s Mission Field.

Let me share with you again, what you said you were called to do, what you said was your DNA, what you said is at the core of who you are and what you know God is calling you to do. It is clear in the seven point proposal that you offered to Central Congregational. Your Leadership Circe has ironically, taken to referring to these as the “seven points of light”. And I think that they are points of light. Light in a dark and hurting world. Hope for the hopeless.

The congregation of Hope Church agrees to unite with the congregation of Central Congregational Church (CCC) to become one congregation, housed at 85 Seaverns Street, Jamaica Plain. This congregation will:

- 1. worship God, love her neighbors and be in mission in the fashion that has proven to be transformative for her mission field;*
- 2. continue to live out the identity that we believe both congregations share: to be a prophetic, progressive, ONA, Christian congregation that is extravagant in her welcome, activist in her pursuit of social justice that transcends political, geographic, and demographic boundaries, generous and hands-on in serving God’s people, diverse and open minded in theological perspective, and earnest and deliberate in seeking deeper and broader spiritual practice;*
- 3. integrate the members of CCC and their experiences in a manner that honors what they bring as individuals, celebrates and documents the history that they carry into this endeavor, and incorporates their practices of mission;*
- 4. reflect the fresh, contemporary nature of Hope Church’s “brand”, preserve her evolving worship style which is a product of the gathered community, her dynamic organizational structure and bylaws, consensus style of decision making, and sense of mission and mission field*
- 5. meet twice per year (as called for in the Hope Church by-laws) to do the business of the church and to be in retreat to dialogue and discern on the goals and vision for the future of the church;*
- 6. own and use the building as a tool for mission and ministry; manage that which comes with building ownership: operations and maintenance, relationships with tenants (including honoring those who are currently in place), maintaining a community presence; building investment resources for long term maintenance; and developing and implementing a plan for building accessibility;*
- 7. maintain our membership and financial commitment to both the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).*

Friends, it is clear – it is in you, it is in us, each time we gather-whether it is for worship, or knitting, or praying, or discerning, or painting a new office, or moving again, or breaking bread. This mission, this calling, it is in us when we process questions about music and worship, when we interview candidates for our new pastor, when

we work to figure out how to teach our children our faith, when we walk for World Hunger, or serve pies to women in recovery. This mission, this calling, it is in us when we squeeze the shoulder of a stranger, when we make ditty bags for international sailors, when we negotiate a lease with a tenant, when we visit a shut it or bake something to sell or buy fair trade coffee or search for locally grown food. It is in us – this calling to share the good news of God’s extravagant, prodigal, all inclusive love. We can’t help ourselves – we are compelled to tell the story of how god it is to know God’s love. Seriously, if you let down your guard, you will want to tell someone about it. If you look toward another, you will want to give to them.

It is time for Hope Church to set her face--to the future. It is time to set your face to--Action. To set your face to the next chapter in the story of Hope Church, to set your face to share the life changing good news of Jesus’ presence in your lives.

Today, we set our face to Jamaica Plain—because we know that this is what God wants us to do and we are compelled, we are driven, we have squared our congregational jaw and are filled with the passion of our calling to share with others the stories of the love of God.

There is an old missionary story about an African convert who had been given a copy of the Bible. He was enormously excited and appreciative about his "treasure," which made the missionary all the more surprised when, a few months later, they met again and the missionary saw the condition of the Bible - worn, torn, battered, with what looked like lots of pages missing. "I thought you would have taken better care of the Bible I gave you," the missionary remarked.

The African man replied: "It is the finest gift I ever received. It is such a wonderful gift that I gave a page to my father, and a page to my mother, and then a page to everyone in the village. "--*As narrated in Bob Benson, ea., "See You at the House": The Very Best of the Stories He Used to Tell (Nashville: Generoux, 1986), 185.*

This is why we have the stories to begin with – to share them and spread the wealth of our treasure. As we set our face to the future, and learn more about how we can share this amazing gift we have found in our relationship with God and with Hope Church, I leave you with these thoughts from one of histories finest evangelists:

We are sowing seed. Some indeed may fall on beaten paths and some among thorns, but it is our business to keep on sowing. We are not to stop because some of the soil looks unpromising.

We are holding a light. We are to let it shine! Thought it may seem but a twinkling candle in a world of [dark]ness, it is our business to let it shine...

...We are kindling a fire. In this cold world full of hatred and selfishness our little blaze may seem to be unavailing, but we must keep our fire burning...

...We have bread for a hungry world. The people may seem so busy feeding on other things that they will not accept the Bread of Life, but we must keep on giving it, offering it to the souls of [humanity].

[And] We have water for a famished people. We must keep standing and crying our, “Ho, every one that thirsts, come ye to the waters.” (*Billy Graham*)

Friends, I pray that you will set your face... for action. We have been given the gift of God’s grace so that we might share it with others.