

Sermon: Sunday, September 12, 2021
Rev. Rodney Kennedy

Show your colors or Make Me a Metaphor for Jesus Mark 8:27-38

Some days we feel that we could use a sign from God. Like Jacob clinging to a man in an all-night wrestling match, hanging on by the foot, and saying, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Some days we cry, "Give me a sign of good faith." We can be fierce bargain hunters when it comes to God's blessings. Other days God gives a clear sign and we don't want to see it, hear it, believe it or do it.

Jesus gave his disciples the ultimate sign in the gospel lesson from Mark: The sign of the cross. Peter wanted nothing to do with Jesus' speech act. "If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it. Those who are ashamed of me in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed." My sermon "means" on multiple levels. At one level, I am inviting you to "show your true colors" as followers of Jesus. This will not be an easy task, because like Peter we have our minds set on human things. You may think Peter missed the sign (he could be slow), misunderstood the message (he could be impulsive), or didn't like the message (he could be stubborn). But I think Peter knew exactly what Jesus was pointing to. He knew that being raised with Jesus would mean dying with Jesus. Peter was ok with Easter, but he wanted to skip Good Friday.

On a deeper level, the sermon is my response to our remembrance of 9/11. I believe there has to be a counteroffer of peace and reconciliation in our national life to the war on terrorism, to war without end, to violence in our streets, to the message of revenge, and the attempt to make war sacred and all our dead, heroes. If you were angry yesterday, I understand, but anger is not the Christian way. "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil." Why do Americans only know how to memorialize the war dead? Does anyone remember April 9, 1995, and if so, do we remember the 168 dead by a domestic terror attack? How will we remember the 671,000 Americans who have died from COVID? It is hard to talk about 9/11 because I am a Christian pacifist. "I am a pacifist because I think nonviolence is the necessary

condition for a politics not based on death.” I know that our nation faced 9/11 with a spirit of revenge. We declared war because war has become our default setting. By declaring war, we made bin Laden a warrior instead of the cold-blooded murdering killer that he was. The American people said we have to find someone to kill. And we Americans are very good at killing. Indeed, we are the masters of killing. Death must be avenged we have declared, and all I’m saying is that revenge is not a Christian response. If you believe in revenge, you have lots of company, but it not the way of Jesus. Revenge is not the way and remembering is not enough. How about working to make sure there is never another Vietnam or Afghanistan?

Everyone stands for something. Why not stand for what matters the most? After all, every decision, every action builds our legacy. There are certain crucial points where the decision we make changes everything. One moment in life may determine the fifty years. Our task is to know when that moment, that Kairos moment, that one opportune, exact right moment, occurs.

I will attempt to get at the Kairos moment for Peter and his disciples by going through an ancient story from the book of Joshua. I find in the story of Rahab of Jericho one of those crucial moments. I offer Rahab as what I call a “story metaphor.” Joshua had sent two spies to assess the situation in Jericho. He sent the spies on a secret mission. But why did the two spies go straight to the house of Rahab, a prostitute? No doubt the brothel had a hot line to the palace – to the high and mighty politicians. But the spies are not some biblical James Bond. They are cast in an antiheroic mold. We find them hiding under bundles of flax. The spies face a life and death situation. If Rahab turns them over to the police, the spies are finished. Rahab does the most surprising thing. She recites the Israelite creed: “I know that Yahweh has given to you the land.” The power of God shows up on the lips of a foreign woman.

This was Rahab’s seminal moment. Gardner Taylor puts it like this: “She threw in on the side of the purposes of God.” I find that there are certain moments like this in our lives. Rahab protected the strangers in her house. She put her life and freedom at risk when she lied to the police. In our age of big whopper lies, I am nervous about defending a lie, but in this case, the lie is in the interest of a greater good. Lying is a sin, but Rahab told the lie in the cause of goodness, on behalf of the future. I suppose we all have moments when we don’t tell the whole

truth. We don't go around telling people how awful they look or how old they are. If we visit someone in the hospital, we don't say, "You look like death warmed over."

Rahab let the spies down from her house by a rope through the window, but she asks the spies to give her a guarantee that she and her family will be protected. "Give me a sign of good faith" she insists. The spies give her the guarantee and they give her a symbol, a sign, a pledge: A scarlet rope. They told her to hang that bright scarlet cord in the window of her house and when the armies of the Lord passed through, they would protect the house where the scarlet thread hung in the window. When the army of Israel invaded the city of Jericho, the commander of the troops, Joshua, told his soldiers to watch out for the house of Rahab. Even in the noise and smoke and confusion of battle they were to bring Rahab and her family all to safety away from the path of destruction and death. Joshua told his men to look for the scarlet rope in the window. "That house where the scarlet thread hung in the window was the house protected by a promise and was to be saved." And that is exactly what happened.

Look, Jesus is our scarlet rope. All of us are under the siege of life and death. No one is spared the ups and downs of life, the turmoil, the tribulation, and sometimes the terror. Life can wear us down. Finally, death cuts us down. There is but one hope. The scarlet rope in the window. Jesus and his cross and resurrection. When the Jesus we claim as Savior becomes the Jesus we declare to the world, we are showing our colors. We are draping the scarlet rope in the windows of our homes. This is increasingly important because the church, instead of showing our vivid colors, is turning gray. Instead of living color, we are fading into gray – a kind of neutral color that is really the absence of color.

Now, I have another extended metaphor and this one is a baseball "story metaphor." Skip Bertman, LSU legendary baseball coach, and winner of five national championships, has a story about the rope. He says, "I called each player into my office and showed him a piece of rope that I threw over the edge of my desk. I asked each player, "If you were at one end of the rope with nothing between you and a thousand-foot fall to certain death, who would you want holding the other end of the rope, knowing that his hands were so strong and that he loved you so much he would never let go?" Well, Marty Lanoux said Jeff Reboulet, and Reboulet said Andy Galy, and Galy said John Dixon, and so on. I

said, "Fellas, when you tell me, 'It doesn't matter who holds on to the other end of the rope, as long as he's a teammate of mine', then we'll be one. We'll be free to trust one another, make mistakes, and still feel good about our decisions."

In the final game of the regular season, the Tigers were playing Auburn and a win would make them SEC champions. In the 14th, we went ahead again. Stan Loewer, who had also pitched the day before, came in to face Auburn in the bottom of the inning. Stan worked himself into a situation with a runner at third base and two outs. He was standing behind the mound, rubbing up the ball. That's when everything changed. A senior pitcher from Miami, Florida, Robbie Smith, stood up on the edge of the dugout and called, "Stan, Stanley, hold on to the rope, hold on!" Marty Lanoux at third base turned to shortstop Jeff Reboulet and said, "Jeff, hold on to the rope!" Jeff shouted across the diamond to first baseman John Dixon, "John, hold on!" I can remember our catcher, Rob Leary, with his fist in the air, shouting, "Hold on to the rope!" The Auburn hitter grounded out to the shortstop, Jeff Reboulet, and the Tigers were SEC champs. That moment, Bertman said, changed everything. The Tigers turned the corner that day in Auburn, Alabama. I want you to keep in your mind: "Hold on to the rope!" Here's what we have so far: "Show your colors" and "Hold on to the rope!"

The church, in my mind, faces our own Rahab moment. We have accommodated our faith to the culture, we have Americanized the faith, we have worshiped false gods, and we have gone "whoring" after secular political power. And across the country we are diminished, depleted, and even dying. Churches close every day and sacred buildings become restaurants, breweries, condos, and carpet stores. The church has to decide if we are on the Lord's side or not. We have been offered the scarlet rope – the sign that God will raise us up. Look, the church is in exile, but I believe we are coming back.

Reticent, timid, secret Christians need to show their true colors. This is not the time to be ashamed of Jesus and his message of peace. Show your colors – a metaphor for living the life of faithfulness, of keeping God's commandments, or honoring God's sabbath, of being God's holy people. Show yourself as a child of the Lord. Deck out in the colors of the faith. Don't leave any doubts in the minds of those you encounter.

I offer you Christ our Scarlet Rope, our Passover, Christ, Mary's baby and older than Melchizedek, our great High Priest. Come on people now, show your colors and hold on to the rope! Ask Jesus to make us metaphors and speech acts of his life, death, and resurrection.