

19 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25 – Year A – October 26, 2011 - Homily
Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46
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Did you ever play the board game *Clue*, also known as *Cluedo*? That's the murder mystery detective game where we all try to figure out "who done it", where, and with what dastardly weapon? There are apparently over three hundred possible combinations, but at least one of my favorites is, "Colonel Mustard, in the library, with a candlestick." What we never really understand in the game is the age-old question of motive, or why?

There have been a number of suggestions as to Paul's motives for writing the way he does in this portion of his first letter to the Thessalonians. For example, some say that the words have a tone of defensiveness about them, or that Paul is somehow trying to establish his authority amongst the people of this fledgling Christian community. There are actually some circumstances that we need to be aware of if we are to understand this letter in context. Paul is one voice proclaiming the Gospel truth in what one commentator calls, "an open market of competing truth claims and competitive orators that vie for attention and allegiance" (Tat-Siong Benny Liew). This is an accurate description of most first century Greco-Roman cities, where philosophers and rhetorical debate abound. However, if we think about today's world, the technology has changed, but the prevailing attitudes are similar. We too live in a global marketplace of competing ideas and information, some are secular, some are religious. Each of these also vies for our attention and our allegiance. Just think advertising, television news commentaries, political debates, as well as the opportunity to come to church and hear a sermon, or participate in Bible study, watch a religious T.V. broadcast, listen to the radio, or surf the world wide web. The opposition that Paul experiences comes from his own Jewish peers, the rival teachers on behalf of the plethora of other gods, as well as the roaming philosophers of the day.

The persecution that Paul and his team experience in Philippi is one example of what happens when rival opinions, truth claims, or forms of religious expression clash. Paul was treated brutally and imprisoned for preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ. Our Gospel is a dangerous Gospel, there are still many in the world who don't hear it as Good News, but as a threat or a significant challenge to their way of life. Sharing the Gospel comes with risks. On Sunday, I asked the Bible study group what kind of sacrifices they had made to share the Gospel. It's a question we all must reflect on. Our context is different from Paul's. Yet in living our faith, and sharing the Good News, we risk our relationships with family and friends, we risk job promotions, we risk ridicule by living out values that are not shared by others, and so on. Still, Paul continues to risk everything for the sake of the Gospel. His life expresses the most incredible motivation. Clearly, this is more than just something he is doing for himself. If we *are* doing what we do in Christ's name for our own sake, it wouldn't take long for us to simply give up, especially if we got beaten up or put in prison. Similarly, how long would we be motivated if we risk and lose something or someone, and feel the pain of that loss deeply? Nonetheless, in the reading we find Paul confident that his ministry is one approved by God. He describes himself and his fellow apostles as empowered emissaries of God's word, entrusted with the Gospel. That's a sacred trust that we, and all Christians, are blessed to share. We do what we do in order to please God.

Paul risks his very life, and considers it an honor and a blessing. His life and ministry is entirely focused on pleasing God, not on pleasing mortals. That kind of single-minded faith and

faithfulness takes time to develop in our own lives. One anonymous writer says, “To risk is to be called a fool; to weep is to risk appearing sentimental; to reach out to others is to risk being involved; to expose your feelings is to risk revealing your true self; to dream is to risk loss; to love is to risk [being rejected]; ... to go forward in [the] face of overwhelming odds is to risk failure. But risk we must because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing. The person who risks nothing, does nothing, is nothing. One may, for the moment, avoid suffering and sorrow but he or she will not learn, or love, or change, or grow. Only the person who risks is totally faithful.” How many of us will be a fool for Christ today or any day? How many of us will risk it all for the sake of the Gospel? Jesus’ life is our most profound clue to living faithfully and obediently. It certainly doesn’t avoid suffering or risk. Jesus is the perpetual victim. We know that the motive was largely political power and manipulation. The place was outside the city walls of Jerusalem, and the means was a Roman cross. I’ve heard it said that risk is another word for faith. We risk faith in order to risk freedom and abundant life in Christ.

Paul has one final lesson for us tonight. His approach to discipleship is not a hierarchy of power, but one of humble servant leadership. As he says, he did not make any demands as an apostle of Christ, even though he would be entitled to at least food and lodging. Paul’s living faith and service are empowered by God, but he considers all disciples as equal, and equally important. Just like Jesus, Paul’s style of evangelism is persuasive, not pushy or demanding. His love for all is genuine, and grounded first in relationship with God in Christ Jesus, and then in relationships with others. You and I live out our faith in a world full of inequity, full of systems of power that promote injustice, and full of people who abuse power to stay in power. As Christians, should we look like this world? No! Our motive, our reason for being, is to share life in Christ to the glory of God’s name. Our intentions are always to love and serve humbly, treating others with dignity and respect, and to build up the Body of Christ. That’s what the kingdom of God looks like. In order to make a difference for Christ, we should be different. We should be transformed by the renewing of our hearts and minds. Paul is willing to be vulnerable. He shares his deep affection for the Thessalonians, but he never compromises the Gospel in order to please people. This is also our challenge of faith, what we risk, as we seek to deepen our relationship with Christ, and follow Him as obedient and faithful disciples. That’s a tall order. Our Baptismal vows hold the answer, which is also embedded in Paul’s letter, as we proclaim, “I will, with God’s help.”

Amen.