

In India cows are sacred. Cows are sacred as they are docile animals giving milk, cheese and butter along with dung for fuel. Cows, like all animals are off limits as a source of food as Hindus are vegetarians. Cows, monkey and dogs freely roam the streets. Dogs raise their puppies on the streets and calves walk behind their mothers. Occasionally you will see a chicken or pigs wondering through the streets. The animals move about the countryside and the city streets as if they the masters of the realm.

The cows are known to torment street vendors as nibble at their goods and chew on sacks and packages of food for sale. One cow was known for his plodding, determined way of walking. As his horns were worn down, rounded rather than pointed, it is safe to assume that he is advanced in years. If you got in his way he would keep his steady pace and rather than walk around you he would drop his head and push you to get out of his way. I know because it happened to me. That was one stubborn, determined bovine.

It takes determination, a sense of purpose to enter into a crowded store or airport or train station, especially when they are so dense with people you can't imagine finding your way through the sea of humanity. Under such circumstances there are a few choices available to you. You can leave, not practical if you are on a tight schedule. You can wait and hope the crowd thins out. Again, not a good idea if you have a plane to catch or are trying to take advantage of a sale. You can attempt to mosey along hoping that no one picks your pocket in the process. Or you can put your elbows out and set your face, determined to work your way through the mass of humanity to where you need to be. Amazingly that seemed to be the way of life in India. The people walked in a steady path, working their way through crowds, past carts, cars and animals, undeterred by the activity around them.

We all have those moments in life when we are determined, set on accomplishing a task, regardless of whose toes we may literally step on. But how many of us are as determined to step on toes, metaphorically, when it could mean we will be challenged, threatened or put in physical danger?

Jesus was not one to shy away from danger. He was going about the countryside teaching, healing, casting out demons. His travels took him closer and closer to Jerusalem. Along the way he met with Pharisees and other religious elite bent on baiting him, hoping to catch him blaspheming in some way. Now Jesus had little patience for their hypocrisy – he could not accept their claim to be faithful followers of God yet more interested in following rules that enhanced their position and stature in life rather than living the call to hospitality and acceptance and love of all people.

So when a group of Pharisees approached Jesus expressing concern for his wellbeing, you have to wonder about their motivation. Granted there were a few

Pharisees sympathetic to and in agreement with Jesus' teachings. But like Nicodemus they tended to come to Jesus in the cover of darkness, like secret agents.¹ These Pharisees, like the disciples, did not fully grasp the scope and depth of Jesus' mission. But we can't help but wondering, if the Pharisees mentioned in today's reading, really worried that Herod will put Jesus to death? Or were they hoping the fear of death would cause Jesus to cease and desist, no longer a thorn in their side?

Regardless of their intentions, Jesus is not wavering. He knows that Herod is sly and as destructive as a fox. He also knows Herod does not control mission or his life. As Jesus is on a divine mission he knows God is the one in control. The reality of Jerusalem's reputation, as a death trap for prophets, did not deter Jesus' resolve to move forward. Knowing that his message will fall on deaf ears in Jerusalem, Jesus still is determined to fulfill God's call even though it means the ultimate sacrifice, his death.

Even though Jesus is of God he is also human. So I can't help but marvel at his determination to live fully into whom God has called him to be. I also have to marvel at those in recent history who have taken up a cause and stuck with their beliefs to live for the greater good, even when their lives were threatened. People like Abraham Lincoln, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. immediately come to mind. I think of the young people from Parkland who spoke out against the lack of gun control and the pervasiveness of violence that is part of their world. Those young people remained strong and determined even though there were many who were and have been outspoken against their message.

Let's be honest, how many of us are willing to put our lives on the line for a cause, a commitment, or a mission, we claim to hold dear? How many of us are able to trust God fully when God calls us to be in mission, calls us to live as faithful disciples? We may think we live in an age and place where we having nothing to fear, but I am not so sure we really grasp the tenuousness nature of our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. No, I don't expect us to be taken off and hung or imprisoned, at least not in the Northern Hemisphere, but that may change as time goes on and our culture becomes more insular and more rigid and less open to differences in individual expression and perspective.

Shifts to conservative, dogmatic ways of thinking and behaving are happening in all parts of the world today. Nasrin Sotoudeh is an Iranian human rights lawyer. She has dedicated her career to defending women's rights, including the right to remove the hijab (the head covering) in public. Needless to say she is not popular with the theocratic government of Iran. She has been arrested several times, tried many

¹ John 3

times, once in abstentia, and has served time for her beliefs and her activities. This week it was announced that she has been arrested on multiple charges, sentenced to 38 years in prison and 148 lashes. Even though she knew her fight against oppression and injustice did not earn her a good reputation politically, she did not relent. She remains determined to bring to light the abuse of women in the country. And so she will pay for her actions and her determination with her life unless the world community is able to cry out loud enough and long enough to secure her release.²

Another sign that the world is becoming narrower is the vote at the Special Called General Conference of the United Methodist Church. The vote, of delegates from around the globe, made it clear, we, as a church, are anything but united. Do we buckle under and accept this limited interpretation of scripture resulting in a church that is exclusive and punitive? The answer is no, we move forward, determined to remain open and welcoming to all people, sharing the Gospel message of God's love and acceptance of all for who they are.

But that may or may not be without risk. If the Judicial Council of the UMC determines the Traditional Plan holds and if the traditionalist decide to go on a witch hunt, that could mean trouble for many clergy throughout our Annual Conference and the Western Jurisdiction. This includes those Untied Methodist Clergy, both active and retired, and the Methodist Churches in the Central Coast who have put their names on an advertisement in the New Times stating, in so many words, that we are not in agreement with the vote at General Conference and will continue to keep our doors, our minds and our hearts open to all.

And I take heart in the formation of an LGBTQIA Conference Task Force consisting of LGBTQIA clergy, laity and allies that will have its formational meeting next Wednesday. The goal of the task force is to design a future for LGBTQIA inclusion in our church. I take heart that in a rural community in our Conference, a pastor is forming a theology pub specifically as a forum for those in the community who have been excluded or harmed by church because of their sexuality and gender identity. I rejoice that the Annual Conference will be taking out a full page ad in the LA Times, making it clear that for us, ALL means ALL. I also rejoice that the Conference and the Western Jurisdiction are not willing to abide by the vote. And I give thanks, that at this point, the vote is not set in stone.

Based on comments received from various members of the congregation we will be putting up a tile banner on the calming wall and on the red sign that reflects the

² Women in the World, "Iranian lawyer who defended women's right to remove hijab gets 38 years, 148 lashes," 11 March 2019, accessed online 13 March 2019 @ <https://womenintheworld.com/2019/03/11/iranian-lawyer-who-defended-womens-right-to-remove-hijab-gets-38-years-148-lashes/?fbclid=IwAR2m8fMcTNNHKvFATc90FGAJUyqbUy8icy3Of7Xi7z-pt8dwcDpz3vbrsZU>

rainbow. The rainbow lets others know we are a welcoming and open community of faith. We will also be very judicious in the application of our apportionment dollars. We will not provide financial support to those programs that promote the education of or the enforcement of any laws that promote the discrimination of any of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

So do we live in fear? No. Do we express to leaders of the Annual Conference, Bishop Grant and our District Superintendent Jim Powell, our concerns and our hopes and our frustrations? Absolutely! Do we speak up in the community, letting people know we are not that type of Christian? You bet yah! Do we live determined to remain faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, loving God and neighbor? There is no doubt.

And we pray. We pray for a letting go of the anger and betrayal and grief we feel so that we are able to move forward in a constructive and positive way. We pray for those who have been pained and harmed by the church because of a narrowness of thought and a lack of love for all. We pray for the courage to speak up and stand up with and for those who have been maligned by the church or society in any way.

And we remember, pray and take hope and comfort in the words of the Psalmist:³

The Lord is our light and salvation; whom shall we fear? The Lord is the stronghold of our lives; of whom shall we be afraid? Teach us your way, O Lord, and lead us on a level path because of those deemed to be enemies. Do not give us up to the will of our adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against us and they are breathing out violence. We believe we shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord! Amen

And we remember, we remember Jesus did not deter his course of action because there were those who were against him, those who did not like his words or his actions, those who saw him as a threat to their way of life.

Let us put our trust in the Lord, for the Lord will lead us and guide us, as long as we are willing and determined to be guided by God's love and mercy for all. Amen

³ Portions of Psalm 27.