

Vultures

Matthew 24:1-28

March 30, 2014

“Ode to a vulture.” A haiku by a poet with the screen name, “reconciled.”

*the unwanted guest
patiently the vulture waits
watching ... at death's door*

“Wherever there is a dead body, the vultures will gather.” Fred Phelps was a vulture.

Fred Phelps was the founding pastor of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, a church populated mostly by his own extended family members with a few “converts” from the outside. His church has drawn national attention for its in-your-face message of hatred and condemnation, targeting in particular gays and lesbians and a culture he deemed too tolerant of homosexuality.

Fred Phelps and his followers are vultures, gathering around dead bodies. Their preferred tactic is to stage protests at funerals, often high-profile funerals, displaying signs that read: “God hates fags,” “Death penalty for fags,” “God hates America.”

They protested at the funeral of Matthew Shepherd, the young man killed in Wyoming in 1998 because he was gay.

They picketed the funeral of Matthew Snyder, a Marine killed in the Iraq war, not because he was gay, but to dramatize their claim that God is judging our nation, judging us, for our tolerance. Westboro Baptist Church members have picketed countless military funerals, carrying signs declaring: “God curses the troops,” “Thank God for 9/11,” “Thank God for dead soldiers.”

I encountered them myself in 2001, when they stood on the sidewalk, many of them young teens, across the street from the auditorium in Kansas City where the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ were holding a joint national gathering. Their signs read, among other things: “UCC fag church,” “No tears for queers.”

And some of you may remember that twenty members of Westboro Baptist came to Waterloo in 2005, staging a protest at the funeral for Jason Gage, a young gay man murdered in his room in the Russell Lamson building. Their message: “Gage is in hell.”

They are vultures, feeding on dead bodies, preying on people at their most vulnerable, dishonoring and defaming and picking at the memories of the dead, heaping anger and insult and outrage on top of grief. Fred Phelps was a vulture. And he was a Christian. He presented himself as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have met the enemy ... and he is us.

There are lots of vultures out there. Jesus warned his followers to look out for them: false Messiahs, false prophets, false teachers, preying on people at their most vulnerable, in the midst of their fears, their troubles, their suffering. In a world that is frightening, in a world that is full of troubles, in a world that does bring much suffering, these vultures swoop in, taking advantage of people desperate for hope, desperate for help, desperate for clarity.

They offer themselves as saviors, messiahs, messengers of righteousness, painting the world in black and white, providing easy answers, a ready path to salvation, and a clear delineation between the good ones (they themselves and those who follow them) and the evil ones (whomever they choose to make scapegoats for their hatred and, of course, everybody else who does not listen to them!).

Who are these vultures and why do they do it? Who knows? But they are there, some of them undoubtedly deceiving God's people for profit, some of them taking advantage of people to feed their own egos, driven by a thirst for power and control, and some of them, some of them perhaps nothing more than servants of the devil. It will happen. They will come. "Wherever there is a dead body, the vultures will gather."

And there is plenty to attract them. The fact is that countries fight each other still. There are famines everywhere. There are earthquakes everywhere. Jesus was right!

Of course, Jesus was right. It's not too hard to predict that there will be troubles and wars and natural disasters. But the genius of Jesus' prophecy, the remarkable claim of Jesus' prophecy, the hopeful and exhilarating and utterly unique affirmation of Jesus' prophecy is this: all these things, troubles and wars and famines and earthquakes and all human suffering, are like the first pains of childbirth.

Like the first pains of childbirth! Not something to escape or evade or even grieve, but something to go through, something to endure, for the sake of the new life that is coming. That's what Jesus urges his followers to do: to hold on, to hold out, to the end! The Good News about God's Kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world for a witness to all people, and then the end will come.

A witness to all people ... That is our job, here and now, not to do what we can to save ourselves from the terrors and hardships and uncertainties of this age, but to offer a witness, here and now, to all people about the good news, about God's way, about life as God intends, about life as God will make it.

History has a direction, a course, a goal, a direction willed by God, a course charted by Jesus, a goal toward which all creation moves. All creation moves toward God's Kingdom, toward shalom, toward reconciliation. In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, and God has entrusted with us this message of reconciliation.

This gospel, the gospel of reconciliation, is clearly not the gospel Fred Phelps was proclaiming. His was a false gospel. He was a false prophet. He was a vulture. The gravest threat to God's people, to the purpose for which we are called, comes from within our own ranks. We have met the enemy and he is us.

That's what is spoiled, that's what is compromised, that's what is destroyed, by thieves and hypocrites and murderers and vultures: our witness, our distinctive and vital witness to God's good news.

If people see us doing the same things for the same reasons in the same way as everybody else, putting ourselves first, protecting what we have, concerned above all with money and power and personal security, how will they see God? We are robbing them of the good news. We are thieves.

If we are hypocrites, dishonest about ourselves, making ourselves out to be strong and good and certain of ourselves, how will all those who are weak, who feel guilty, who have doubts -- like all of us! -- how will they hear the good news of God's forgiveness and mercy and welcome?

If the church is like any other institution, concerned first with its own preservation, protecting its own powers and prerogatives, using the world's own weapons -- vilification and condemnation and even violence -- to vanquish its enemies and keep its detractors at bay, and if we silence our own prophets, if we "murder" -- literally or figuratively -- those who speak the truth to us, exposing our own sins, then how will the message of reconciliation be heard, or if it is heard, how will it be believed?

And if we are vultures, preying on people in pain, offering no better than black and white answers and easy scapegoats, instead of coming alongside them in their pain and bearing their suffering with them, how will they ever know of the God of love who sent Jesus to bear our pains and carry our sorrows?

There is news to tell -- good news! -- but no one will hear it from thieves or hypocrites or murderers or vultures. Christians like Fred Phelps only do mortal harm to the church's witness and blind people to the message of reconciliation with which the followers of Jesus have been entrusted.

Fred Phelps was a vulture, but eleven days ago, this man who dishonored dead people, died himself. What shall we say? How shall we remember him? This is what Amy Tracy had to say, a woman who experienced first hand what it meant to be a target of Fred Phelps' venom ...

I have harbored a bitter root of ill will toward Fred Phelps. His hate lodged into my heart during a tender time of spiritual growth. News that he was admitted to hospice and near death brought about mixed feelings this past weekend. I volunteer for hospice twice a week in a faith-based role. I care for and love people without a clue as to who they are or what harm they've committed in their lives ...

I have a world of compassion for the dying. In large part, it's my calling. But what would I do with Fred Phelps as he wastes away in hospice?

I consider the military funerals he and his church protested. I think about the LGBT community -- of how many are tormented with thoughts of eternal damnation because of him. I wonder about all those who turn Jesus off completely because of his hateful words and spiteful actions.

Would I moisten his mouth with drops of water? Could I bring myself to wipe his forehead with a cold washcloth? Would I hold his hand and tenderly whisper the Psalms? Could I pour over him prayers of thanks and pleas of mercy from God?

These questions niggled at me this weekend, mostly because I likely minister to all sorts of men (and women) like Fred Phelps. But while there are signs of bitter, hard and even hateful lives, I don't know the horror. I haven't walked with them in life -- or watched their antics on the news. I'm presented with frail human beings, desperate for peace, for human touch, for forgiveness and for mercy.

One additional thought occurred to me: There is one among us who is never conflicted by whether or not to forgive or readily extend mercy. It's Jesus. He sees all of our hateful moments and hypocrisy -- which I suspect are plentiful for most of us -- and extends love without condition.

Fred Phelps lies in hospice. I don't like to think of Jesus with him through the hands and words of a hospice volunteer -- but that shows how far off the mark I am in the grace department. It's a cause for prayer, for sure.

As the debate begins to rage about whether or not to protest Fred Phelps' funeral, this gives Christians a unique opportunity. This doesn't involve giving nod to his ideology or suggesting he even knows the true Christ. However, it may present the chance to talk about mercy and how God is willing to forgive the worst of sinners.

The passing of Fred Phelps, and our reaction to it, presents a witness of grace so rarely demonstrated in our world. May God have mercy on Fred Phelps.

May God have mercy on Fred Phelps. May God have mercy. This is our witness. This is the message with which we have been entrusted. May nothing ever prevent us from offering this clear and compelling witness to all people, for all people: May God have mercy ...