

Too Little, Too Late

From the series: Faces Around the Cross

Text: John 12:41-42; John 19:38-39

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

On the Op Ed page of a recent *New York Times*, there were two commentaries, both of them discussing President Clinton, both of them by rather well-known columnists. The first one was by Gary Wills, who wrote about the campaign finance fiasco and the use of the Lincoln bedroom as a favor for the gaining of some financial support. He said, "You know what, really, is the big deal? The whole world runs on doing favors and it's not only in political office, but don't we all do favors for our friends? And is Chelsea the only one who can have guests at the White House?" Then he mentioned one of his favorite novel characters, Jimmy Flannery, who lived in the era of the old Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago when Chicago ran very well through the precinct bosses and favoritism and patronage, and he says, "As a matter of fact, I think a lot of people enjoyed that much more than the present faceless, bureaucratic regime. Now, if someone does a favor and it affects policy, then complain, but, otherwise, let's face it - don't we all do favors, one for another, and isn't that really the way the world works?"

The other columnist was Anthony Lewis. His column was a very sharp critique of the President, for he, too, referred to the campaign finance matter, but he said, "I'm concerned about deeper substantive policy decisions in which the President has failed to stand for his principles." He referred to a recent article in the *Atlantic Monthly* about welfare reform, written by Peter Edelman, who was the Assistant Secretary for Health and Human Services. He resigned when Clinton signed the welfare bill because he believed that, although there was the need to reform the system and there was much good accomplished, there also was much that was simply mean-spirited and was the saving of dollars at the expense of the most vulnerable of society. Anthony Lewis, citing Edelman's article, goes on to say there are people who are mystified by the President, how he can betray principles that apparently he seems to affirm. But Anthony Lewis said it's not a mystery at all, for Bill Clinton will not stand for his principles if it puts him at a political disadvantage.

That's a damning criticism and I am not here this morning to talk about campaign finance, welfare reform, or President Clinton. I use it as an illustration

of that which confronts all of us every day of our life - the question as to whether or not we will stand up, speak up and act on our principles, or whether we will be silent, simply saying nothing in order to keep peace at any price. It's easy enough to take potshots at a sitting President. It is easy enough to ridicule the politician for the compromises that he or she must make, failing to remember that politics is the art of compromise in order to keep the system functioning. It is not that they alone face this dilemma; they are simply the most visible among us, for all of us, every day, get into situations and circumstances in which we have to decide - Do I say something, or do I keep silent? Do I tell the truth in which I believe, or do I let it rest? At the office, at work, in our professions, in the school system, community, indeed, in the Church - that decision that confronts us time and again - will I stand up and speak up for my principles, or will I simply shove it under the rug and keep peace at any price?

The Faces Around the Cross today are the faces of Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus. The fourth Gospel tells us that Joseph of Arimathaea went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus, that he might bury it, and he was joined by Nicodemus. John is the only one that adds Nicodemus to the burial party, but all four Gospels point to Joseph of Arimathaea as the one who gave respect and dignity to the burial of Jesus. Matthew simply says that Joseph of Arimathaea was a disciple. Mark says that he was a disciple who was waiting expectantly for the Kingdom of God. Luke says he was a good and righteous man who, although a member of the Council, did not agree with their plan and action and was waiting expectantly for the Kingdom of God. John tells us he was a disciple but, he adds, "secretly for fear of the Jews." And it is not accidental that John couples with Joseph the secret disciple, Nicodemus, who, he tells us, "came to Jesus by night."

In John's Gospel, he is affirming Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus. He is indicating that, in both cases, there was something else operative and yet, at the point of Jesus' death, he affirms them for "coming out of the closet," so to speak, identifying with Jesus and Jesus' cause, and according Jesus that final dignity. For John really was writing to his own community, also at a time of crisis, in which he was saying to them, "Joseph and Nicodemus finally, belatedly, but nonetheless, actually identified with Jesus and his cause; they made public their faith. Go, thou, and do likewise." That, obviously, is John's purpose in painting these strokes into his picture of the crucifixion.

I admittedly am going to walk around that scene and put a little different spin on it, because I believe that John himself gives us the clue within his own Gospel about the nature of the action of Joseph and Nicodemus. You will remember in January during the season of Epiphany, I suggested to you that the fact that the light is come is a wonderful, wonderful truth and a wonderful reality, but that it is not enough that the Light has come, that to our insight we must add courage and wed action in order that we may be agents of human transformation. Light is not enough. Light, then, calls us to responsible action, courageously, in light of the Light. And I used that paragraph from John 12.

After closing the first half of his Gospel, the Book of Signs, John says Jesus did all of these signs and still they did not believe on him. But then he says that there were those of the authorities that believed in Jesus, but for fear of the Pharisees, for fear of being put out of the synagogue, they did not confess their faith because they loved human glory more than the glory of God. That is as damning a criticism as Anthony Lewis' criticism of Clinton, and it happens to be the same kind of thing. Nicodemus was obviously one John had in mind, and Joseph of Arimathea, as well. John rescued them at the end of the Gospel because they finally came out, belatedly, and confessed their faith and identified with Jesus. But I want to suggest to you, at least I want to raise the question - wasn't that too little, too late?

That's not a simple question, because I don't know what eventually happened to Nicodemus and Joseph. We don't have, really, the historical data, and so I have to admit that I'm simply working with the clues that John gives us in the Gospel. But, might it not be that Joseph and Nicodemus themselves would have said, "Yes, it was too little, too late."

They did believe, you see. All four Gospels call Joseph a disciple. Luke says, "good and righteous." Mark adds expecting the Kingdom of God. Joseph believed; he knew in his heart that Jesus was right, but never confessed it publicly for fear of his position. And Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and he said, "Teacher, I want to know what's going on here because you could not do the things that you do unless God were with you." And so, these were not two people on the periphery who were just waffling. These were two men who were convinced in their heart that Jesus was the prophet of God, sent of God, the Word in flesh. I wonder what would have happened if they had stepped up sooner rather than becoming partners in the burial scene - too little, too late.

It's not an easy matter, because this was not a simple situation. Can't you imagine Joseph and Nicodemus meeting in the men's room? Catching each other's eye in the midst of a stormy session in the council room, nodding and meeting out there and saying, "What do we do? We both know the truth."

And one saying, "Yes, but we have positions of influence and if at this point we should step up, we're going to lose those positions, sure as the world. And if we're not inside, we won't have the influence, we won't be able to direct events down the line."

The other saying, "Well, that's true. But, on the other hand, what if things get out of hand and we're only the two of us. It may get such momentum that we won't be able to stop it."

The other one says, "Yes, but on the other hand, isn't it better, perhaps, to have the fabric of society maintained? What if ...? You know, Jesus is calling for a radical transformation of society. He is right; he's digging deeply into our own traditions of Israel. What he's calling us to is right; what he's calling us to do

would be for the ultimate salvation and health and well-being of our people, but what if that radicality should take hold? What if the Romans should move in and destroy this place? Caiphas is right - maybe it's better if one die for the nation than that the whole nation perish."

They must have struggled with those things, because they were good, honest, responsible leaders in their community, and the answer was not black and white; it was not simple, it was complex. And so, they didn't do anything.

Well, that's not quite fair. At one point, in the midst of a controversy in the Council, Nicodemus did offer a word of moderation and, in chapter seven, verse two, they looked at him and said, "Are you from Galilee, too?" In other words, he just about let the cat out of the bag and, at that point, being identified with Jesus, he would have been out of the Council and out of the synagogue. So, it's not a question of whether or not they were aware or whether or not they struggled, it's just a question if, with 20/20 hindsight, they didn't do too little, too late.

Does one tell the truth if it will disrupt and disturb? Does one speak one's truth if it puts a community or institution in jeopardy? Is it better to have social conformity, society limping along with truth being denied, even when it's believed and understood than it is to speak the truth and take the risk that it all might fall apart and chaos ensue? Questions that are pertinent not only to nations but to professional practices, corporate entities, communities of faith wherever you live. How do you weigh, how do you weigh the way of wisdom and integrity and truth?

It's the old Falstaff dilemma. William Shakespeare suggests to Falstaff that he flee away in order to be able to come and fight another day. But, sometimes, it's too little, too late.

The first Broadway play I ever saw and maybe still the most powerful was Ralph Hochhuth, "The Deputy," which was a very sharp criticism of papal policy during the Nazi regime when the Holocaust was happening. That play was condemned by the Roman Catholic Church as unfair and untrue. The critique was that, in order to preserve the Church, the Pope was silent about the horror of the Holocaust and didn't do enough to alert the world to that massacre that was ensuing. Just recently, in a current journal, I read that issue still being debated, "The Deputy" still being talked about. Was it fair or wasn't it fair? Was the Pope right or was he wrong? Was his silence justified or was it criminal? Was it right to seek to preserve the institution under the domination of that Nazi regime, or is it ever right to preserve an institution at the cost of even a life, let alone six million lives?

"Schindler's List" - Schindler was no saint; Schindler was a wild, money-spending cowboy! But he got caught up in that process, he began to see the bestiality, he began to see the demonic, he began to do what he could do to rescue Jewish people during that period of time, having saved 1000 or more through his own efforts, spending his own fortune. At the end of the film, and perhaps the most

moving scene, when the war is over and they are liberated, they take the gold out of their fillings and find it wherever they can and melt it down and mold a ring and present it to Schindler in appreciation for what he had done to save their lives, and he begins to weep, and he weeps uncontrollably because, he says, "Why didn't I do more? I did so little. I could have done so much more!"

A wonderfully loved, beautiful, profoundly wise Christian leader died some time ago, and there were many beautiful things said in the eulogies that were offered. One eulogy said, "You were so wise. You saw so deeply. You saw so far into the distance. You understood so much. Why didn't you tell us more clearly?"

Lewis Smedes grew up in Muskegon with deep roots in the Christian Reformed tradition, for the last 28 years taught at Fuller Seminary, lectured at Calvin Seminary and College last week, and was interviewed by the *Grand Rapids Press'* Religion Editor, Charles Honey. Not because of any probing on Honey's part, but because Lew Smedes, now retired, 75 years old but still with a passionate heart for compassion, said, "The Church is wrong on this question of sexual orientation! And it is misspent passion to fight as is going on." And then this really loving Christian leader said, "I don't want to disturb people, but people need to be disturbed."

I don't know how Nicodemus and Joseph finally came to terms with this. I don't know what price they paid. I suspect, if they were given the gift of old age, they had come to terms with what they did, which was noble in itself. Perhaps they came to terms with what they had not done, even though, if they had stood up, spoken up, if they had been able to move events in a different direction, if they had been able to change the mind of the council to change the mind of the populace, Jerusalem might not have been destroyed forty years later, let alone the fact that Jesus might not have been crucified. Perhaps they came to see that to preserve any institution on a falsehood is futile.

Well, I don't know how they came to terms with it, but I trust they did come to terms with it because, finally, if they were disciples of Jesus, as they were, they knew that in the end all is grace. But I wonder if, when they grabbed their grandkids and put them on their knee and spoke about their spiritual pilgrimage and their experience of life, they might not have stroked the hair of those little ones and said to them, "We did something, but it was too little, too late." And that's very sad.