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May we use our voices


by Joy McDonald Coltvet

You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God’s. Any case that is too hard for you, bring to me, and I will hear it. (Deuteronomy 1:17b)

In the animated film *A Bug’s Life*, a huge colony of ants are used and abused by a few big, bullying grasshoppers. As the ant colony says, “they come, they eat, they leave,” and this way of life has gone on forever. Until one day—the usual pattern is disrupted by a crash. The grasshoppers are about to wreak havoc on the ant colony when one ant, Flik, confronts the grasshopper-in-charge, Hopper. Flik speaks up: “It’s you who need us! We’re a lot stronger than you say we are.” As he is speaking, Flik sees Hopper blink nervously, and says in surprise, “And you know it, don’t you?”

Words like this are interwoven all through our scriptures. For people who are pressed down, persecuted, and used for others’ selfish gain, the prophets and gospel writers and letter writers keep proclaiming this word of hope and resistance. Not only are we called to speak and act; we are called to do it boldly. We are drawn into community to do this work together, because no one of us has the power or wisdom or unconditional love to do it alone.

You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing; when you bear witness in a lawsuit, you shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice. You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. Exodus 23:2, 9



These are interesting words of wisdom from Exodus. Don't just go along with the crowd, the commentator, the campaign letter. Bear witness—put yourself in a situation where you can see and hear and speak with your neighbors, the neighbors you avoid as well as the neighbors who think as you do. Do justice. Try to be fair and don't hold back the justice due to the poor. Don't oppress those you call outsiders because in your heart and history, you are one, too. What a different set of values to take with us as we enter into conversation in community, not to mention to the voting booth!

What if we engaged in conversation across the lines drawn in the sand? What if we didn't avoid possible conflict in talking about candidates and important issues with our neighbors, our families, our congregations? What if in these conversations we were less concerned about winning, about being right? What if we were more concerned about everyone having a voice than whose voice was loudest? What if elections were more about communities coming together in all their God-given diversity, around their common interests, for the common good?

As he prepares disciples for his leaving, Jesus promises to send the Advocate.

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:26-27)

As followers of Jesus, we have received the Holy Spirit. We are called to be advocates because of this relationship, because of the presence of the Advocate. This is the One who calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies us—and not only us. This word is a challenge to those who live with the right to vote, have voices to advocate and privilege to use on behalf of others in need. May we use our freedom to set others free. May we use the gift of voice to do justice and love kindness and walk together with God.

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Faith Reflections: Faith in action


by Emily K. Hartner

I took a course on public art during my first semester of college. As a class, we were asked to design a billboard for the side of a local highway. I don't recall the specific discussions that went into that billboard design, but the message ended up being something like, "Stand up for what you believe." The accompanying image was a hooded girl kneeling on her knees, hands folded and head bowed in prayer. The implication, of course, was that you could kneel in faith and simultaneously stand for something much larger than yourself.

But how do you know what to stand for? How do you determine what's valuable? How do you determine a worthy cause for which you are not willing to back down? How do you decide when standing up for something (or someone) is worth the risks involved? Can our faith help us out? Well, if our faith in Jesus lies at the core of our lives, then yes, our convictions should and will emerge as a result of that faith.

Our legacy for taking risks

Jesus—the person in whom we place our trust as Christians—was a person of convictions. His cause—the ideal for which he stood—was love. He lived that conviction by healing on the Sabbath, by eating with "questionable" people, by touching people with leprosy and people who were dead, and by forgiving sins. In showing such love, he risked being rejected in his hometown. He risked being criticized for breaking the rules of the Sabbath. He risked becoming "unclean" from having touched others who were ritually unclean. Ultimately, he risked his life.



Martin Luther was also a person of convictions. Luther's cause was the gospel—the good news that we cannot obtain forgiveness or righteousness from God on our own, but that it comes by God's grace and through our faith in Jesus. In standing for the gospel (remember his famous line, "Here I stand"?), he risked being excommunicated. Our faith, as both followers of Jesus and as Lutherans, is a product of people who stood for their convictions.

If we were to make a list of those who have gone before us who stood up for their convictions, it would contain countless other individuals as well: Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela, just to name a few. Perhaps our mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers are also among those who remained faithful to their values. I am the person I am today—as a Christian, as a Lutheran, as a woman, and as a pastor—because of so many individuals who stood for their convictions. You are the person you are today for the same reasons.

Our convictions define us

If we claim to be disciples of Jesus, then baptism (our own incorporation into Christ's death and resurrection) should serve as a guide for our own convictions. In the life of baptism, we are asked the following: Are we living among God's faithful people? Are we hearing the word of God and sharing in the Lord's supper? Are we proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through word and deed? Are we serving all people, following the example of Jesus? Are we striving for justice and peace in all the earth?

Perhaps it would be a good discipline for us to examine our lives and our current values alongside both the convictions of those who have helped shape us and our baptismal promises. In doing so, our own convictions rise to the surface of our day-to-day lives.

For me, I decided that striving for justice and peace in all the earth meant contributing to the efforts that address the systemic causes of homelessness in my community. As a result, I volunteer one afternoon a week at an organization that serves our city's homeless population. This organization has done a lot of research that reveals that (probably more surprising than it should be) the answer to homelessness is ... homes. During my afternoon of volunteering, I answer phone calls and transfer them to the folks who can help. Sometimes I help people sign up for services. It doesn't always feel like I'm doing a lot, but it enables the staff to work on finding—and creating—homes and other supportive services for people in our community who don't have them.

Our convictions, our core values, represent our faith. They are our faith. The ways in which we use our voices, our money, our time, and our talents say something about the God in whom we place our trust. Standing for our faith can sometimes feel very risky and uncomfortable. Claimed in the waters of baptism, though, we remember that we are backed—and more, that we are loved—by the One who stood for us.

Discussion questions:

1. Who do you think in your own life stood up for convictions in a way that helped shape who you are today?
2. If you could choose one of the baptismal promises around which to form a conviction, which one would it be?
3. Choose an event in Jesus' ministry that represents one of your core values. In what ways do you, or would you like to, further that value in your own community?

Closing prayer:

Loving God, on the cross your Son stood for love when your love for the world was at risk. Thank you for your love and for all those who have gone before us who have stood for their own convictions. Give us the faith and courage to be bold witnesses of your love to those in our communities that need it the most. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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