

Why I Got Arrested Yesterday

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
a new church for a new day, in Fremont, California,
on Sunday, August 4, 2013, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer
Scripture: Esther 4:1-17 and Acts 4:1-4
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The wittiest thing I tweeted or posted on Facebook last week (and maybe in quite some time) was this: “At least with the NSA we get a government agency that will listen to us.”

I was proud enough of this line to brag about it to a friend who describes himself politically as an independent with libertarian leanings. He chuckled and then we started a conversation. He asked me if I thought real change at a governmental/societal level was possible without revolution. I am becoming increasingly convinced that it is not. However, the revolution will have to be nonviolent.

The civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s was successful in bringing about real societal transformation because it was largely nonviolent. It was pictures of peaceful young people being set on by police dogs and knocked over by fire hoses that galvanized complacent whites to push for changes in Jim Crow laws.

Sometimes letter writing and protesting are not enough. Sometimes it's necessary to take direct action in opposition to the powers that be so that God's truth can be heard above the cacophony of falsehoods and sinfulness.

Now I know some people in our congregation are uncomfortable with the word “sin.” It is a word that definitely carries plenty of baggage with it. But there are situations where the actions or plans of the powers that be are sinful. To use a lesser word fails to speak God's truth.

When Haman plotted to kill all the Jews in the Persian Empire, that was sinful. It wasn't just “wrong.” It wasn't just “a bad choice.” Pogroms are sinful.

But when the rulers, the people with power decide they are going to undertake such sinful acts, what is a common person supposed to do? All too often we sell ourselves short, denying the power we have. All too often individuals have power they aren't aware of. All too often people aren't aware of how power can be made manifest when people band together in community.

Esther was in a position where she thought she had no power. She was a Jew who had been forced into a beauty pageant so the king could select a new wife. The old queen had been cast out for exercising her power. Commanded by the king to come before him and a bunch of powerbrokers so the king could show her off, Vashti refused. Not only was this an insult to the king and the other elites in his court, but word might get around and all the women in the kingdom could become

uppity and start exercising their power. So Vashti was cast out and Esther was forced into becoming queen.

What power did Esther have? None she assumed. Then the plans of the king's number two, Haman, to kill all the Jews became known to her. What could she do?

Perhaps, Mordecai told her, you were made queen for just this moment, "for such a time as this."

What Esther decided to do could be called non-violent direct action. It could be called civil disobedience. Risking not just arrest but also execution, she decided to exercise her power and speak truth to the king. It turns out that the risk paid off, Haman died, and the Jews were saved. But even if Esther had been killed for speaking truth to power, it still would have been the right thing to do.

Sometimes sin needs to be confronted even if doing so is against the rules or against the law, even if doing so comes with great personal risk.

It wasn't sin that Peter and John were confronting when they were arrested. They were just speaking God's truth. And they weren't confronting the powers that be with this truth. They were just sharing it with anyone who would listen. Well, there was something about the truth they were sharing that was troubling to the religious power brokers, so Peter and John were arrested.

Now, there's nothing within the text to suggest that Peter and John planned on getting arrested. They just went out to share God's truth with anyone who would listen. What the text does suggest is that the gospel can be offensive to some and that sharing God's truth can get you in trouble. Sometimes you can get arrested for sharing God's truth.

That is a fact that was all too clear to the people who put their bodies on the line in the Civil Rights movement. And that included preachers. In fact, clergy were at the forefront of the movement. But that makes sense (and Don Anderson can back me up on this). Civil right is a moral issue. In fact, civil rights was *the* moral issue of that day. Making visible the humanity of each person was paramount to the cause. You can't get much more biblically grounded than that: recognizing the humanity of every person.

For several years, I've been preaching that climate change is *the* moral issue of *our* day. In some ways, it shouldn't be. Climate change "is, or should be, dry science, an entirely rational question that should be addressed by economists, engineers, scientists working on our behalf and with our thanks; a democratic process, difficult but not controversial. No one has a prejudice against chemistry, an animus about physics. A moral issue? Almost the opposite. Opinion isn't the issue; no one's heart should need changing.

"But it's not happening. For [over] 20 years now scientists and engineers and even many economists have spoken with rare unanimity: we need to use much less fossil fuel, and very quickly."¹

We need to do this. We need to stop dumping the carbon – currently sequestered underground in those fossil fuels – into the atmosphere (and through the atmosphere, into the oceans). To continue to do this, to continue dumping carbon into the atmosphere will cause catastrophic changes to climates worldwide and it will cause sea levels to rise. Changing climates and rising oceans will, in turn, create hundreds of millions of climate refugees.² Changing climate and rising oceans will cripple our ability to grow food and feed the earth's people.

People starving is a moral issue. People displaced from their homes and sometimes their nations is a moral issue. And the wars that may well come over food and water – that too is a moral issue.

In the 1950s, there were other moral issues that needed to be addressed beside racism. But racism was the overarching moral issue here in the United States.

Today, there are other moral issues that need to be addressed beside climate change. Wars need to end. People need to be free. People need to be safe and healthy and have access to meaningful employment that pays a living wage. But climate change is *the* overarching issue. If we don't address it now, these other issues won't matter because we will have so radically changed the earth.

Unfortunately, "we've made the science of climate one more political football – just another issue we square off over, as if physics was simply one more interest group. As things stand, we are nowhere near taking the decisive action that might give us a chance of avoiding the most devastating kinds of warming; as coral bleaches, deserts grow, and ice sheets melt across the planet, we're just marking time."³

This is why two and a half years ago, Bill McKibben said it was time "to mount a campaign of mass action, of civil protest, of dignified disobedience. Its goal would not be to shut down the fossil fuel system – that system is much too big and too pervasive to be shut down, since it powers every action we take from the moment we wake up. The campaign's aim, instead, would be much simpler: to demonstrate the sense of urgency that this issue requires. It would be in the nature of a witness."⁴

Bearing witness is our business, the church's business. That's what Esther was doing when she went to see the king. That's what Peter and John were doing when they got arrested. That's what I was going yesterday in Richmond when I was arrested.

I was bearing witness to the sinfulness of Chevron's failure to maintain their refinery, resulting in the explosion and fire a year ago that sent 15,000 people from surrounding cities to the hospital.⁵ And more importantly, I was bearing witness to the sinfulness of Chevron's business plan, the one they've filed with the SEC and that's in their annual reports, to extract, refine, and sell as much oil as they can, the climate be damned.

Participating in protest was not enough. I needed to risk arrest to speak God's truth to the power that be.

I know the announced sermon title was "Why I May Be Getting Arrested," not "Why I Was Arrested." But as I rode BART to the Richmond yesterday, tightening up today's sermon, I went over my reasons for getting arrested in the future and realized that the future was now. Climate change is *the* moral issue of our day and the religious community needs to be putting our bodies on the line to bear witness to this moral issue and to speak truth to power. And preachers need to be in the forefront of this work.

I know this sounds like a radical action. It's not. In fact, it's just the opposite. It is deeply conservative. "What's radical is to double the amount of carbon in the atmosphere and just see what happens – no one, not Marx or Mao, has ever proposed a change as radical as that. Those radicals backed by the fossil fuel industry flirt with destroying the planet's physical systems, and they do it so a few of us can keep our particular way of life a decade or two longer; that's not just radical, it's so deeply irresponsible [and immoral] that there's really no precedent."⁶

And that's why I got arrested yesterday, and will probably be getting arrested again.

ENDNOTES

¹ Bill McKibben, "Disobedience," *The Christian Century*, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2010-12/disobedience> (posted 27 December 2010; downloaded 1 August 2013).

² Bangladesh has a population of over 150 million, most of whom will become climate refugees because of rising oceans and more frequent and devastating monsoons. Add to that people displaced by desertifications, other rising water refugees, and people displaced by famine and growing lack of access to potable water and you quickly get into the hundreds of millions.

³ McKibben, *op. cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See, for instance, Vic Lee, "Richmond to sue Chevron over 2012 refinery fire," *KGO-TV San Francisco*, http://abclocal.go.com/kgo/story?section=news/local/east_bay&id=9192856 (1 August 2013).

⁶ McKibben, *op.cit.*