

*A sermon given on Sunday, June 13, 2010
At St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio
By the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

The Perils of Being Right

Let me tell you a tale of Saint Columba.

Columba was born in Ireland the year 521. He was from family which had been ruling parts of Ireland for hundreds of years. But Columba was more interested in the monastic life. He became a monk, but had a passionate love for traveling, and thus by the age of 25 he had been involved with the founding of 37 new monasteries. Another of Columba's great passions was books. In the sixth century, of course, such books were in the form of manuscripts, and Columba went everywhere in search of volumes that he could borrow and copy. When others refused to loan him their manuscripts, he resented it bitterly.

Once when visiting the abbot Finnian,ⁱ Columba undertook to make a clandestine copy of the abbot's Book of Psalms, by shutting himself up at night in the church where the psalter was kept. A curious nighttime passer-by peeked in through the keyhole, saw what he was doing, and reported it to the Abbot Finnian. Indignant at what he considered a theft, Finnian claimed the copy as his own when it was completed, on the grounds that a copy made without permission is akin to a theft. Columba refused to hand over the copied manuscript, and the matter was referred to King Dermott for a judgment. The king declared his decision by extending an old Irish proverb, "To every cow her calf; to every book its copy."

Well, Columba was having none of it. "It is an unjust sentence," he proclaimed, "and I will revenge myself!" Soon after this incident, a young prince was being pursued for having committed an accidental killing. Columba tried to give the prince refuge, but King Dermott had the young man seized and put to death. Columba's fury knew no bounds. Already irritated by what he considered an unjust ruling on the matter of the copied book, he now felt that his right as a monk to grant sanctuary had been violated. And so he threatened the king: "I will denounce to my brethren and to my kindred thy wicked judgment ... and they will listen to my complaint, and punish thee sword in hand. Bad king, thou shalt no more see my face in thy province until ... God has humbled thee on the battle day before thine enemies." (Baring-Gould, p. 95)

So, Columba went back to his own territory, he stirred up the powerful clans of his relatives and friends, and directed their hostility against the king. A strange conflict of copyright violation was escalated into a full-scale civil war, and bloody battles took countless lives. When the killing died down, a church synod was convened, at which Columba was accused, rather justifiably, of having occasioned the shedding of a great deal of Christian blood. Columba tried to rationalize his insurrection. "It was not I who caused it," he argued. "It was the unjust judgment of King Dermott, and his violation of ecclesiastical immunity which did it all!" But a wise counselor countered: "A monk would

have done better to bear the injury with patience than to avenge it with arms in hand.” [Baring-Gould, p. 98]

Columba was convicted and banished from Ireland. Furthermore, his sentence was that he should win for Christ by his preaching as many pagan souls as the number of Christians who had fallen in the battles he had caused. And so it was that Columba went to spread the faith in the north of Scotland. Indeed, Columba became the same kind of beloved figure for Scotland that St. Patrick had become in Ireland a century earlier. From his monastery on the island of Iona, Columba spent the rest of his life, with his followers, serving the poor and spreading the Gospel of grace and forgiveness.

What is this story all about? For me, it is a tale about the hazards of being right. We are perhaps never in greater spiritual danger than when we are absolutely certain that we are in the right, and others are in the wrong. Columba had a reasonable point about that Book of Psalms. He was not plagiarizing someone else’s original work. He was copying a book of sacred scripture which, after all, must itself have been copied from earlier manuscripts in turn. And the principle of ecclesiastical sanctuary was one at least worth debating before the execution of the accused prince. Columba had some legitimate grievances. But as his mother must have taught him, because all our mothers did: Two wrongs do not make a right. In his vengeful and disastrous response, Columba showed forth all the risks inherent in being convinced that we are right. Which are what?

I would name these four dangers: harsh judgmentalism; smug self-righteousness; vengeful action; and gossipy self-justification. As it turns out, we see several of these same dangers at work in today’s Scripture reading.

In the First Lesson [II Samuel 11:26-12:10], King David lusts after Bathsheba, the wife of his neighbor Uriah. He arranges to have Uriah killed in battle, in order to take Bathsheba as his own. The prophet Nathan arrives and tells David a story, the tale of a rich man with countless flocks, who grabs away the solitary lamb of a poor man. David is outraged. He is righteously indignant! In his smug self-righteousness, he condemns the rich sheep stealer, and recommends a vengeful response: “This man deserves to die!” says King David. But the penny drops when Nathan says, “You are the man!” David’s judgmental response is exposed for the hypocrisy which it is.

In the Gospel Lesson [Luke 7:36-8:3], Simon the Pharisee is astonished that Jesus is eating with a woman whose sinfulness is a matter of common knowledge. “If this man were really a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him,” sniffs the harshly judgmental Simon. Jesus does not deny the woman’s sinfulness. Rather, he uses the incident to highlight the gratitude with which Simon, or any of us, should respond to God’s gracious forgiveness of our own sins. Throughout the Gospels, the Pharisees are constantly the foil for Jesus’ message of grace, and his caution about the pitfall of judging others. The Pharisees were not Bad Guys. They were devout and committed people. But they often succumbed, as do we, to the hazards of being right.

The tale of St. Columba, and the Scripture readings today, warn us against these hazards. The pitfall of harsh judgmentalism leads us (like Simon the Pharisee) to view others as somehow beyond the reach of God's inclusion or grace. The pitfall of smug self-righteousness leads us (like St. Columba, and King David, and Simon the Pharisee) to be so focused on what we view as the moral deficiency of the other, that we are blind to our own faults. The pitfall of vengeful action leads us (like the rancorous Columba) to engage in retribution which itself violates our own religious principles. And the pitfall of gossipy self-justification leads us (like the rationalizing Columba) to circulate about with our own version of events, rationalizing our behavior to others, getting them on our side, as if somehow God will be fooled with them.

These are real dangers. They are known to us from our personal stories, just as they are known to us from scripture and saintly legend. And I cannot fail to observe that these pitfalls are hazards for us as groups and as nations, just as they are for us as individuals. Recent events in Gaza remind us once again that any group, no matter how genuine its religious faith and how legitimate its own historic victimization, can succumb to the hazards of being "right" when like Columba it becomes blind to its own self-righteousness and vengeful action, and violates its own best principles.

These are genuine dangers for all of us – collectively and individually. Like Simon the Pharisee, St. Columba is for us a cautionary tale. Yet it is also a tale of hope, for here is what we are told about the remainder of Columba's days:

The history of Columba's life proves that he was born with a violent, and even vindictive temper; but he had succeeded in subduing and transforming himself to such a point, that he was ready to sacrifice all things to the love of his neighbor. [He passed his latter days as] a friend, a brother, a benefactor of others, a ... man occupied not only with the salvation, but also with the happiness, the pursuits, and interests of all his fellow-creatures.... [Baring-Gould, p. 116]

From Scripture and tradition today, a message for us when we find ourselves feeling certain about someone else's shortcomings. Jesus says, Mind first your own spiritual business. Put your own moral house in order before fussing about your neighbor's shortcomings. Re-direct your energy from judging your neighbor, to serving him, and we'll all be better off.

ⁱ Tale as recounted by Sabine Baring-Gould in *The Lives of the Saints* (London: John Hodges, 1874), vol. 6 (June), pp. 94-100.