

April 13 – (Palm Sunday) Sanctified Stubbornness
Philippians 1:12-21

As we finish our look at James Moore's book, "When the World Takes the Wind Out of Your Sails" he poses a question: "Is stubbornness ever a virtue?" For Moore the answer is "Yes" when it comes to holding onto ideals and values. Jesus was stubbornly faithful. Today and all of this week we celebrate this sanctified stubbornness of Jesus. It led him to journey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in such a way that it forced the hand of the high priest. He had been in Jerusalem many times and always before he had slipped in, a pilgrim amidst the crowds. But today he rides in accepting the praises of his disciples who are proclaiming him messiah. He knew that this kind of public display would lead to conflict with the authorities but he did not back down. Throughout this week, while in the temple, he verbally spars with the Pharisees and Sadducees challenging their opinions as he shares his own. Even on the last day of his life, when he is in the judgment hall in front of Pilate, the Bible makes it clear that Pilate sought for a way to release him. But Jesus remained stubbornly faithful to his ideas and to his God and it all led finally to his death upon a cross. We too are called to this kind of stubborn faith.

Today I want to temper what Moore said in his book. If we read his words too casually we might think he is glorifying any and all actions where one just sticks to their principles and doesn't back down. We need to remember that the symbol of this kind of stubbornness is the balking mule! This kind of stubbornness is narrow, rigid, arrogant, unyielding, prideful, unbending, difficult to live with, hard to handle. Synonyms for stubbornness are obstinate or inflexible.

But, as Moore states, stubbornness can be a virtue when it enables us to rise above self-pity; to rise above criticism; to rise above quitting when times are tough, and to rise above compromising on our commitment to God. Here is where I have my concern and it is what I want to talk about today. There is a fine line between stubbornness and sanctified stubbornness. There is a fine line between the ideals Jesus lived and the rigid inflexibility that we often see in religion masquerading as commitment. So today I want to lift up the categories Moore talked about as the

positives actions of Jesus who lived a sanctified stubbornness while cautioning us about the flip side of those lofty Ideals.

Moore first talks about not being filled with self-pity. I agree that if we are too concerned about our own feelings not getting hurt we might never take a stand and just go along with the crowd. But I would also add we have to be careful to not allow ourselves to be filled with self. When we slog on just because, and there is no greater point to what we are doing, we are probably being stubborn. We don't want to focus on what is happening and say, "Woe is me" but we also don't want to see our persecution as some kind of badge of honor. Sometimes we have to let go of what we want for a bigger ideal. Let me give you two quick illustrations to let you get at what I am trying to say. We honor an individual who refuses to sign a homeowner's petition because they think its intent is to exclude some people from their neighborhood and they let the petitioner know that they think this is wrong and cannot in faith support it. That is sanctified stubbornness. This is opposite to the person who keeps suing his homeowners group for not letting him put up a shed, something that is expressly forbidden in the covenant, and proclaims loudly his pleasure at not being talked to at the mail box because if this many people are mad at him he must be right. Keeping self as well as self-pity out of our decisions are a goal in gaining sanctified stubbornness.

Next, Moore talks about how we should not be swayed by criticism. This is true, to a point. If we just try to say and do things that will make everyone around us happy we will have no center, no direction, no values. But, when we are criticized we should reflect on what is being said, to see if there is any wisdom in the words. To ignore criticism because we know we are right gets us back to the first problem of too much self and instead of sanctified stubbornness we are unreflectively plugging along. This is just being stubborn. Growth comes when we listen and if necessary change. Not doing so is just being pig-headed to use another synonym for stubborn.

Refusing to quit, as we read in Moore's book can be a good thing but sometimes it is just being stubborn. We have to always ask, "Is it time to throw in the towel?" It is not always a sign of faithfulness to keep laboring along on a path, refusing to change or quit just because. That can lead one to getting into a rut and the deeper the rut the less

ability we have to change and it leads to just being stubborn. Think about times when you or people you know keep on because they don't want to be seen as a failure. They have quit asking if the thing they are doing is of God or life giving, and they are just refusing to quit. Now it might have begun as an activity that was truly blessed by God but because there was no reflection it has become a rut. Or we read how people continue to invest more money in something that isn't working, throwing good after bad because they cannot believe they were wrong in the first place. Also, we are all guilty, at times, of holding on to a view or opinion for no other reason than we don't want to change. There is a word for all these kinds of actions, stubborn.

Now I need to say again that I agree with Moore. There is a kind of sanctified stubbornness that Jesus lived and we should strive to follow. But the danger is that it can lead into inflexibility and rigidity. So, how do we live the ideal and keep to the center of the path of faithfulness and away from the edges?

We need to be firm in our commitment to God. Yes, on this we should never compromise. But what is our standard? If it is just our opinions about what faith should be, this can cause us to be very narrow and judgmental. In the past few weeks we read about the death of Fred Phelps, the founder of the Westborough Baptist Church. This is a small family congregation that gained a reputation for picketing funerals of veterans and others because of their belief that their deaths were a judgment on America because of our increasing acceptance of the LGBT population. There was a petition signed by over 300,000 to label this church as a hate group instead of a faith community. Now no one ever doubted Fred Phelps commitment to God. But most people in this country believe that his interpretation of the Bible was wrong. He was stubborn in holding to his beliefs and teaching them to his congregation but was he faithful? That is the question.

I believe all of our faith opinions must be weighed against the core teaching of Jesus which was that God is love. This is where we need to accept criticism. If someone says what we are saying and doing isn't loving, we have to at least look at that challenge. Now, there are all sorts of ways to be loving and responsive but that ideal should be our core. Much of what we proclaim to be "religion" is nothing more than

ideas and historical actions that have become comfortable and therefore normative. We choose to not examine them or change them proclaiming we are being faithful or to use James Moore's term, sanctified stubborn. We are seeing monumental shifts within the Catholic Church because Pope Francis is admitting a lot of long held beliefs are just that, beliefs and not core to the message of Jesus. He will never budge on what he sees as central, loving all, helping those who are poor and oppressed, and living sacrificially so all can live. Last year during Holy Week he washed the feet of people in a prison and some were women. It sent shockwaves through the church because Popes had never done that before. He said that what had been done was tradition, just that and he was not bound by it. He did what Jesus did. It will be interesting to see whose feet get washed this week!

So we all need to be firm in our commitments and not let opinions, criticism and challenges turn us away from faithfully proclaiming our faith. But also, we need to be open to Jesus' message of love and always let that message challenge us and yes, sometimes change us, because we want to be faithful and not just stubborn.