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Showing God's Love

Matthew 16:26

During our recent vacation we were able to spend several days in Deerfield, Massachusetts. We went there because I had learned several years ago that some of my ancestors were involved in a catastrophic event in that community in 1704. Deerfield was at that time on the exposed edge of the colonial settlements of New England. When war broke out between the French and the English, the French quickly identified Deerfield as an easy English target. The town was attacked by a combined French and Indian raiding party in the early morning hours of February 29, 1704. The people of Deerfield had been on high alert for such an attack during the previous Fall, but no one expected the French to travel 280 miles with their Indian allies in the dead of winter. While the towns people had taken the precaution of sleeping in the stockade, it did them very little good on that night because the sentry was not awake when the attack began.

What followed was the most destructive attack ever experienced by a colonial village in New England. Nearly all of the houses were burned to the ground. Twenty-five percent of the 300 men, women, and children of the village were killed. Thirty percent were taken captive and forced to march 280 miles through the snow to Canada. Many families were wiped out and others were torn apart. The experience of my ancestors was typical. Only one managed to escape, but his mother was killed, his one year old daughter was killed, and his wife was taken captive along with their three year old son and six year old daughter. The wife and son from whom I am descended were ransomed two and half years later. The daughter was adopted into a Mohawk family and lived the rest of her life as a Native American.

Most of the captives were eventually ransomed, but they all spent at least two years in Canada. Some were in the custody of the French. Others were held by the Indians. The devastating raid and the drawn-out hostage negotiations created a major political crisis in Massachusetts. Many of the clergy were asking how God could allow something like this to happen. The famous Puritan minister Cotton Mather of Boston suggested in sermons that the tragedy may have been God's punishment on the people of Deerfield for their sins. He called it a warning to other frontier communities to rein in their loose living.

But when the Puritan pastor of Deerfield, John Williams, returned from his two years as a captive in Canada he offered a strong defense of his parishioners. He wrote a

book in which he argued forcefully that the people of Deerfield had done nothing to deserve such a terrible tragedy. It happened because their defenses were not strong enough and the sentry was sleeping at the worst possible moment. But the more difficult question for Williams was why he and the others continued to live in a place that everyone knew was so vulnerable to attack. The year before the raid there had been many warnings that the French had targeted Deerfield and that sooner or later something very bad could happen.

Williams cited two reasons that people stayed. The first was that the colonial government wanted Deerfield to be well populated and made sure that settlers who left would have to lose their investment in farms and buildings. Williams noted that this did not deter anyone from leaving. Their fear was strong enough that most were more than willing to suffer a huge loss to move to a safer place. The real reason no one left Deerfield was the quality of the relationships that bound them together. They were a close knit worshipping community. Every family knew that pulling out would deliver a discouraging blow to their neighbors. Leaving would make the situation of their friends more perilous. Their love for their friends and neighbors was stronger than the fear which hung over them. They chose to live in fear and hope for the best. By embracing their vulnerability they could show their love for their friends (Evan Haefeli and Kevin Sweeney, *Captors and Captives: The French and Indian Raid on Deerfield*, pages 95-111).

This is what God was calling Moses to do in the third chapter of Exodus. God's call to Moses was the direct result of God's compassion for a people who were living in captivity. God sees their suffering and is determined to do something about it. God chooses Moses to be the one who will show the divine love by leading the people out of bondage.

But Moses is reluctant. He responds to God's call with a long series of excuses. He begins by pointing out that God must have dialed the wrong number. This is a job for someone who knows his way around the halls of power. God doesn't want to trust an ordinary man like him with such an important task. "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh ... (Exodus 3:11)?" When this doesn't work Moses tries a stalling tactic by saying he needs to know God's name in order to secure the trust of the persecuted Israelites. But God wasn't buying this lame excuse either. God will give him what he needs to get the job done.

Then Moses plays another card, claiming that his words will probably fall on deaf ears. But God makes clear to Moses that his call is not contingent on how people respond. This is not about doing what is popular. Then Moses resorts to emphasizing his own incompetence. He simply doesn't have the skills to do what God requires. Public

speaking is his very worst asset and this should be enough to disqualify him. But God is not concerned about Moses' deficiency as a speaker.

Finally Moses comes to his bottom line. He begs God to find someone else. He doesn't want to get involved in such a fearful project. God is pushing him too far beyond his comfort zone. Accepting this call will challenge Moses to come to terms with his feelings of anxiety and inadequacy. The message of the Biblical writer is clear. If Moses is to show God's love he must learn to embrace his human vulnerability.

We are reminded of this truth every year when Westminster observes Registration Sunday. This is a day when we are asked to consider the variety of options for serving God through Westminster's ministry. We can all find ways to respond that are non-threatening. But sooner or later we are all challenged to serve God in ways that take us outside our comfort zones. That is where God's power becomes real and God's love is truly shown.

Jesus makes this point in the 16th chapter of Matthew's gospel. Here Jesus describes his ministry as a process of becoming vulnerable to the most destructive forces of his time. The disciples are shocked by what Jesus is telling them. Peter speaks for all of them when he rebukes Jesus by saying, "God forbid it Lord! This must never happen to you (Matthew 16:22)".

This is not what they signed up for on Registration Sunday! All their lives they have been taught that the Messiah would be the one who could fix their problems. The Messiah would solve the Roman occupation. The Messiah would straighten out Israel's sick economy. The Messiah would restore Israel to a position of power and influence in the world.

But Jesus is calling the disciples to a very different understanding of what the Messiah is all about. The Messiah does not come to fix things but to bring God's presence to bear on every aspect of human life. Jesus is teaching them to show God's love by embracing their own vulnerability. This is the ministry that we are invited to share.