

Luke 23: 1-17

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.' Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.' Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.' But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.'

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him.'

The Art of Being Disagreeable Rev. Charles Schuster August 19, 2007

Irwin Kula has an interesting idea, I think a new thought. It's in his book, *Yearnings*. "Disagreement," he writes, "is a gift. It alerts us to something wonderful that's about to be uncovered, telling us it's time to dive deeper." In your bulletin this morning, under the Silent Preparation, we put that statement, saying we as a Christ-centered community inspired by open hearts, open minds, open doors, pledge to insure a safe and respectful environment that transcends differences in our ministry with one another. We put that in the bulletin, but we've also given that to all the leaders of all the committees in the church. Because we become disagreeable sometimes, and because the environment that sometimes we create, even in the church, is an environment we would wish not to have. Disagreement is a gift. It alerts us to something wonderful about to be uncovered, it encourages us to dig deeper. Richard Holloway is a British Episcopal bishop and he wrote, as Joel read, "We need to know ourselves inwardly and understand our wounds, know whom we hate and why, and remember we are loved, even in our anger." The art of being disagreeable.

Yesterday I did a wedding in Boulder, at Chautauqua Park, out in an open field. The rain held off, but just before the wedding started, the ice cream truck went through the

Chautauqua area. About the time I began the ceremony, lightning hit so close to us that what is left of the hair on my head went straight up. I don't think I'm going to do any more of those. In the middle of the ceremony, a late-arriving guest hit a pothole with his car, and the tire just blew up, rubber fragments flowing behind where I stood. And an usher at this wedding - somebody said to the usher, "I'm a friend both of the bride and the groom," and the usher at this wedding said, "I'm sorry, but you'll have to choose a side. We don't have a place for neutrals here."

Some people are constantly disagreeable. If you know a little about their life, you can understand why. Their wounds, as Bishop Holloway suggests. Like the mother who had three children who were always getting in trouble, and someone asked her, "If you had it to do over again, would you have children?" She looked at the person who asked the question and said, "Of course. Just different ones." Some people have developed the art of being disagreeable, constantly disagreeable. Yesterday also, I was part of a panel at the chapel at Red Feather Lakes. There was a Muslim and a Jewish religious leader, and I was there, the three of us. I spoke on the topic, "How do we live in the world with people of other faith traditions?" If I do say so myself, it was an eloquent presentation. Various people in attendance wanted a copy of it. What I tried to say was that we Christians have, in the ongoing conversation with people of other faith traditions, we Christians basically have to remember what it means, and just be Christian. Don't deny our faith, but live it. Which means to be respectful and honest with our Muslim and Jewish friends.

One person there didn't listen much. You can tell, when you're speaking, who's listening and who isn't. *You can tell, when you're speaking, who's listening and who isn't.* And he wasn't. And after the three of us had finished our presentations, this man looked at Matt, who was the Muslim, he spoke and said, "What's it going to be for you in the afterlife, if there's no beer?" I thought, "Now, there's a man who's constantly disagreeable," and his wife must have felt the same, because she threw an elbow at him and he never said another word. Some people are constantly disagreeable, and sometimes you've got to confront people like that.

The clergy on the staff, there's a problem here. There's dissention already among our clergy. It's a sad thing. We had a retreat last week. I hope to get the five of us together and work these things out, but you can understand why there'd be a problem. The five of us, each went to a different seminary. I went to Duke, David went to Drew, Ray went to Garrett, Pam went to Iliff, and Joel went to Boston. And here's the problem - it's Joel's diploma. That's the problem. He has a diploma the size of a refrigerator. The rest of us, our diplomas are small, about the size of a business envelope. A couple weeks ago, Joel's carrying in a piece of wood, he wants to put some more books in his office, and Pam Everhart, whose office is across the hall from his - and I'm in the middle of this, you know, it's awful - She said to him, "I don't know where you're going to find room to put those books, because your diploma's so big." I noticed my diploma from Duke is smaller than Pam's diploma from Iliff. And Ray and David don't even know where their diplomas are. And because of this, we've all become disagreeable, simply because Boston University chose to give its graduates diplomas the size of a sports car.

There are people who are like that, constantly disagreeable. People who search out and find ways to annoy. People who, when they talk to themselves, they don't agree. People who seem to have a knack to search out and find a way to say the wrong thing at the wrong time and to precisely the wrong person. A couple married thirty years moved from the North to the South, where it's hotter and more humid, and somebody said to the husband, "Does the climate disagree with your wife?" He looked at the person who said that and said, "It wouldn't dare." Some people are so disagreeable, even the climate cannot get along with them. Constantly disagreeable.

Sue Monk Kidd, in her book *Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, she opens that book with a story. "It was autumn. Everything was turning loose, and I parked in front of the drugstore. My daughter Ann had an after school job there. It was raining, and I went into the drugstore. I spotted her right away. She was kneeling on the floor in the toothpaste section, stocking the bottom shelf. I was about to walk over to her and say hello, when two middle-aged, walking along the aisle toward her, my daughter didn't see them coming. Kneeling on the floor, she was intent on getting the boxes of Crest toothpaste lined up evenly. The men stopped and peered down at her, and one man nudged the other and said, "Now, that's how I like to see women - on their knees." I walked toward them. "I have something to say to you, and I want you to hear it." They stopped laughing. "This is my daughter," she said, pointing her finger, shaking with anger. "You may like to see her and other women on their knees, but we don't belong there. We don't belong there." Ann rose to her feet. Later on Ann would say to her mother, "Thank you." The two men looked at one another and walked away. "Women," one of them said. "Women." Sue Monk Kidd, in this book, *Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. It's a book for all men who don't understand women, which is every man in this congregation. That book review will be a week from Wednesday. That changed Sue's life, and she wrote that book in response. You and I may not know what to do with those who are constantly disagreeable. They're out there, those who carry their big diplomas around, but we can and we must dig deeper, to see what we can discover.

There are some people who are calmly disagreeable. They simply speak their word in their own way, and it isn't loud. It's kind of quiet and calm. Pilate said to Jesus, "Are you King of the Jews?" and the response? Jesus said back to Pilate, "Those are your words." That's calmly, quietly disagreeable. Last weekend taught a Missions class at the Iliff School of Theology. Thirty-nine women and one man and I, I'm a man, were in this class, and it was on the subject of Israel and Palestine. Three days with forty people I really didn't know, and although there were three members of our church who attended, and for the most part, they behaved themselves. At the end of the class, a woman who seemed to have enjoyed the class and was an eager participant, came up to me and said, "Reverend Schuster, you know, over the years I've heard so much about you, and most of it wasn't very good. I enjoyed the class. You're not as bad as people say you are." There are people who are calmly disagreeable. I think of Charles Schultz, calmly disagreeable, in an interview about a year before his death. Somebody asked Charles Schultz if he had any regrets about his comic strip. He said, "You know, as I think about it, for fifty years Charlie Brown, the little boy, has run up to the football to kick it, and Lucy, the little girl, for fifty years had pulled the football away, and Charlie Brown kicks nothing but air and

lands flat on his back.” Charles Schultz said, “I guess the one regret I have is that I never let Lucy hold the ball long enough so that Charlie Brown could kick it.” But then the cartoonist, who is calmly disagreeable, looked into the camera and said, “You know, come to think of it, it wouldn’t be right to change that. Charlie Brown always misses the football, and so do we.” My favorite sequence in the Peanuts cartoon series is – you know, he can’t fly a kite either, Charlie. He looks at the kite as it lay inert on the grass, clenching his fists into the air he says, “I can’t get this stupid kite in the air, I can’t, I can’t.” Lucy interrupts, saying, “Come on now, that’s no way to talk. The whole trouble with you is you don’t believe in yourself. You don’t trust your own abilities. You’ve got to say to yourself, ‘I believe I can fly this kite.’” Charlie Brown says to her, “You’re right, Lucy, I believe I can fly this kite.” Lucy exhorts him, “All right now, say it out loud.” Over and over again, Charlie Brown says, “I believe I can fly this kite, I believe I can fly this kite. I really believe I can fly this kite.” Lucy looks at him and says, “You do? You really do? Bet you ten to one you can’t.”

Calmly disagreeable. They drive you crazy. Who are we talking about? We’re talking about our mother. Remember, if your mother is no longer living, or your mother is living, remember how she says, “Now, if you go out there and get hurt and break your leg, don’t come running back to me.” Or your wife, who looks over the top of her newspaper as you’re headed out and says to you, as she’s holding the cup of coffee in one hand, “You’re not going to wear that shirt to work, are you?” Or, in this case, this necktie. (It was dark, she didn’t see it.) Or your husband, who says in a manner that’s unwise and ill-timed, “Looks like you put on a little weight around your hips.” Disagreeable, calmly disagreeable. Not a lot you can do with those who develop the art of being disagreeable, calmly disagreeable, but we can, we must, dive deeper, to see, to hear, in their calm quiet, is there anything of the still, small voice?

Let’s consider those who are creatively disagreeable. Constantly, calmly, creatively. There are people who are clever and creative in their expression of disagreement, and we aren’t sure what they’ve even said to us until a long time after they’ve said it. That’s the way they are. There was a professor who wrote on a student’s paper the following comment: “The style of your writing is stilted and stiff, the grammatical errors are blatant and egregious, the footnoting and documentations are inaccurate and sloppy, and most of all, the paper has become what I would describe as stylistically boring. All of which is to suggest that there is a perfect match in the means by which you proffer your pitiful excuses for ideas and the ideas themselves. The medium you offer fits the message, the grade is D, and that in itself is a gift.” Creative disagreement. A man flying a hot air balloon realizes he’s lost, reduces the height. He sees someone down below, he lowers the balloon, he shouts out, “Excuse me, could you help me? I promised my friend I’d meet him an hour ago. I’m lost and I don’t know where I am.” The man below says, as he grabs his GPS calculator, “Yeah. You’re in a hot air balloon, you’re about thirty feet off the ground, and you’re above a field, and you’re between the 40th and 42nd degree north latitude and 58 to 60 degrees north longitude.” “You must be an engineer,” said the balloonist. “I am, but how did you know?” “Well, everything you told me is technically correct, but I have no idea what to make of your information. The fact is, I’m still lost. You must be an engineer.” The guy on the ground shouts back at the balloonist, “And

you must be a manager.” The balloonist replies, “Well I am, but how did you know?” “Well,” came the response, “you don’t know where you’re going, you have made a promise which you have no idea how to keep, and you expect me to solve your problem. The fact is, you and I are in exactly the same position we were before we met, but now it is somehow my fault. You must be a manager.”

Creative disagreement. Over the years you get criticism in the work that I do. I think the most creative disagreement I received happened in Arvada. Well, there’s still hope here, but the last church I served... Every place I’ve ever been appointed, people have, from time to time, been critical that we don’t get to sing the good old hymns. I hear that here. The problem is, for me, that some of the words to the good old hymns don’t fit the particular service, and I like the services to have some coordination. And the other thing is that theologically, I have some problem with some of the words to the good old hymns, so I started rewriting the words of the hymns to fit the themes of the service. “The Old Rugged Cross,” I rewrote. “Amazing Grace,” “How Great Thou Art,” “Just As I Am,” I rewrote all those. It was a brilliant idea – I thought. “Amazing Grace,” for example. I happened to retrieve the first verse of what I had written. “Amazing Life, how great it is, that moves a saint like me, To reach the heights, to do some good, and still God’s servant be.” Wonderful. Some people liked it. The tunes were familiar, the words were relevant. Some people left the church because of it. One day I received a letter, it was anonymously written. I had just completed my version of “Amazing Grace.” They didn’t like it. Creatively disagreeable, they sent me a poem. The poet: “Dr. Schuster: Roses are red, your face should be too, for changing our hymns, and words, shame on you. So leave them alone, it takes too much time, to try and change the message, and make the words rhyme. A lyricist you’re not, for crying out loud, spend the time on your sermons, to please the crowd.” And then it ended, “If you’re bored being a preacher, you might consider becoming a full-time Iliff teacher.” It was the most creative disagreement I have ever received in a church. It put me right in my place. But the sad thing is, the person who wrote that never revealed their name. If they had, I could have employed them in helping me rewrite those hymns. Because this person has a poetic side.

I think that one of the reasons Jesus’ words have been remembered is the manner in which they were given. He rarely offered an answer to a question. He always confronted the culture of his day with a story, creatively disagreeing with the culture. “Love your neighbor,” he said. “Jesus, who’s my neighbor?” they asked. Jesus said, “Did you hear the one about the Samaritan who helped the Jewish man who had been beaten and left on the side of the road?” “Jesus, how do we inherit eternal life?” they said. Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, don’t forbid them, for to such belongs God’s realm.” “Jesus, what’s it like to be in God’s presence?” Jesus said, “Did you hear the one about the farmer who discovered hidden treasure at his farm?” Creative disagreement, so we’ll remember it, so we’ll think about it, so we’ll never forget it. Some people are creatively disagreeable.

A minister with whom I worked in Edinburgh, Scotland, Robert Mathers, (I worked in the Church of Scotland for a year, wore a clerical collar, looked like a mallard duck, but it was a wonderful year.) I worked with Dr. Mathers, and he told me one time, he said he

always knew when Sheila his wife was annoyed with him, because she'd serve him macaroni and cheese for dinner. Creative disagreement. There are those who are creatively disagreeable, you can't do much to change them, but we can dive deeper and tap into our own creativity. The art of being disagreeable – some are constantly disagreeable, we can dive deeper. Some are calmly disagreeable, we can dive deeper. Some are creatively disagreeable, we can dive deeper, because, you see, the best way to deal with people who are disagreeable is to listen to them, remembering that disagreement is a gift that alerts us to something wonderful waiting to be uncovered, and telling us it's time to dive deeper, because even in their disagreement, they may be saying something we need to hear. And we dive deeper, and we discover the voices of disagreement may be from God. Let me say that again. Those who have developed the art of being disagreeable, their voices may be from God. God is disagreeable – just ask Moses. Moses said to God, just as they got outside the Exodus, “Why did you give me these people? Why do I have to put up with them?” God looked at Moses and said, “Because I've got to put up with you.” Or Jeremiah, who was complaining about how it is that people who are dishonest seem to prosper. “Why does the way of the wicked prosper?” God looks at Jeremiah and says, “Get a grip. You're running with human beings, and they're making you tired. Wait till you run with horses.” Or Sarah, to whom God said, “Yeah, you're going to have a baby. Sixty isn't too old.” God is disagreeable, in a way. Whoever says that God is not disagreeable doesn't know what they're talking about. Whoever said that God is not sometimes disagreeable doesn't know what they're talking about. Which is, to end the sermon with a preposition, maybe a new idea.