

The Dangers of Defiance

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-11

It has been a dispiriting atmosphere in our nation's capitol over the last few weeks. With the federal debt limit being reached in the next few days, adding to the woes upon this country paralyzed over the past two weeks by a government shutdown, the usual dysfunction of Washington has reached a new high and the poll numbers of Congress a new low!

It seems fairly clear as to why all this capitol drama has made Americans angry. No one has found an agreeable path to compromise, from the White House to the halls of Congress. The defiance of the Tea Party and extreme right-wing hasn't worked out like they hoped it would. Instead of sparking a revolutionary spirit that might overthrow the federal government, Senator Ted Cruz and others have only managed to make people miss its benefits. Because they chose to stand their ground at any cost, *le cause d'réistance* is now facing the prospects of losing its footing. Rather than being a transformative political movement for the 21st century, the Tea Party has been gambling away their future in Washington, despite their gerrymandered districts.

That's not the way political defiance is supposed to work! Textbook resistance strategies explain that the goal of grassroots organizing is to gain influence in the political sphere, not to lose it—to become more popular among the masses, not be reviled by them! What they are losing in these last two weeks is precious credibility and support in the public square, right at the time when they were expecting to galvanize it most. That's one of the dangers of defiance.

It's highly risky. You have to know when standing your ground is constructive and heroic and when it comes across as nothing more than unreasonable stubbornness, which then only undercuts your influence.

Now don't get me wrong. Unlike some, I won't dispute the right of the Tea Party and its allies to rise up in defense of their beliefs or goals. Their pushback is actually warranted, especially when it's done within the normal processes of our government and political system. It's what we expect and a right we all should defend as an American political value. Once elected, members of Congress should advance their ideas and agenda, aspiring for majority control. Those are rules everyone abides by which allow us, then, to have a government that can pass through periods of radical change in ideology without bringing down the whole legislative system. We've been able to use the ballot box instead of the battlefield—the federal budget and not the federal trust—to change our leadership and political direction.

When handled with a bit of wisdom and in the right context, defiance is a time-honored way of voicing concerns as a minority to challenge current policies and practices; but it doesn't translate into promoting virtual anarchy in the system, where defiance is merely a bullying tactic by those who want to win at all costs. When done in the right time and spirit, the majority are supposed to take account of the interests and perspective of those in the minority, while the minority, at the same time, respects the right of the majority to rule. That's the way our system of governance works, with checks and balances and reasonable negotiated compromises continually trumping ideology. It might not satisfy some, but it's in our collective

interests to abide by this, to get along as much as possible, and to work together on solving our common problems.

That said, to be in the minority means you also have to be a bit more earnest in getting your ideas across. And it requires a gut-check moment to discern if “standing one’s ground” will be an effective tool for change or if it will only result in simply being ignored or dismissed by those in power. This certainly isn’t unique to factions like the Tea Party movement.

When I have been involved in calls for action and civil disobedience at various times—for peace, human rights, economic justice, racial and gender equality—the causes I’ve tended to gravitate toward—that’s often a lesson I and my friends haven’t fully grasped, either. Civil disobedience can make a public statement—even a prophetic one at that—but it doesn’t necessarily mean it’s the most effective action to take. For instance, I’ve had many friends go out and get themselves arrested and be admired and congratulated for how bold and courageous they’ve been in standing up against the powers that be. That’s all well and good for the movement itself—a *cause célèbre* and rallying point. However, more often than not, that ends up being the extent of the influence we’ve had on the policies we’re fighting against. We’ve been defiant, but for what gain? We’ve raised objection, we’ve stood our ground; we’ve taken up our cross and feel justified in our righteous anger. But, frankly, those who we are trying to influence don’t take us as seriously as we think because they view our civil disobedience as nothing more than a publicity stunt. In looking back at times when I’ve been involved in such actions, I have to admit, that’s probably true. Civil disobedience was

more for inspiring the movement than for effecting meaningful change. Thus, it wasn't nearly as prophetic as I believed and it didn't really seem to make a difference to anyone in the long run.

That, likewise, is one of the dangers of defiance: it could well end up being more *about you* and less about the change you really seek. Timing and purpose have a lot to do with it. When we look at the many examples where civil disobedience (particularly *en masse*) actually has been a catalyst for change, it's occurred at an important tipping point in the broader movement. A great deal of consciousness-raising has taken place before such a tipping point was reached. Rosa Parks didn't create the Civil Rights movement when she refused to go to the back of the bus; the groundwork was laid out over years of grassroots campaigning leading up to that moment. Time and circumstances have to be right and have to play out before what is viewed as unjust and warranting change will become everyone else's concerns. Success came eventually, when Dr. King and Civil Rights leaders actually negotiated with the powers that be to bring about the Voting Rights Act and other legislation. The laws wouldn't have been written if all they did was defy the system they sought to transform.

Along the way, they recognized another danger of defiance, which is the delusion that you *don't* need to work within the system to change it—or that your side, alone, possess all the answers—or that you *don't* have to engage your opposition (or even enemies) in any cooperative way or take their interests into consideration. That's a delusion—that's not the way real change comes about—at least that which doesn't impose itself upon others, becoming tyrannical in its

own right. So another gut-check has to be made regarding the point and purpose of defiance—can I work with the ones I’ve considered my enemies, so there is a better chance at achieving the results I seek? Unless you recognize the dangers of defiance, you will likely not succeed in changing very much.

This is a message implicit to our text for today—the dangers of defiance. We have to go back 2500 years to the time of the Babylonian exile, though the dynamics are not unlike what we’re experiencing today. The prophet Jeremiah, in his wisdom, preached against the defiance of those who were in the midst of the second wave of exiles deported to Babylon. All around him were Judean “prophets” trying to incite their people to rise up and fight their captivity—to defy King Nebuchadnezzar and his armies who had sacked Jerusalem after King Zedekiah’s rebellion and destroyed the temple. “Stand your ground” for the sake of God and your country and the rights of your people!—as if defiance was God’s word for them on principle alone. This is the battle cry in many resistance movements—we have God on our side as we rise up to defeat our enemies.

Except, at this point, the remnant of Judah was a terribly dispirited nation, grieving from the massive loss of life on the battlefield and over those banished and uprooted from the only land they knew—refugees forced into exile. The Judean rebellion against Babylon was not only ineffective and futile, in the mind of the Jeremiah, it was also recklessly foolish.

Unlike all of Zedekiah’s court prophets and rebellious allies, Jeremiah—a lone voice of reason—counseled them to take the long

view of history and accept the current reality. *Don't rebel anymore; instead, go on with your lives, make the most of your life under Babylon's rule, influence the culture in which they would now be a part, settle in, make Babylon your interim home and wait for the fulfillment of time*—the *kairos* moment when they would be delivered and returned to their homeland.

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Seek the welfare of Babylon for in its welfare *you will find your welfare!* Jonah got a similar message about Nineveh.

That was Jeremiah's message and a gut-check moment for exiled Judeans. The dangers of continuing defiance would certainly bring about their demise. The stronger power would ultimately destroy them; they would lose all hope if they merely continued to stand their ground and resist. Instead, he urged them to cooperate with the powers that be, settle into their culture; for from *within* that viscerally-hated culture, they would not only allow time to pass, they would be in a better place to effect change.

Predictably, Jeremiah was viewed by his peers and contemporaries as a traitor—as selling out their principles for the sake of survival. But even if his peers rejected his advice, exiled Judeans eventually came to see Jeremiah's counsel as the wiser, inspired by God, whose greater purpose and vision was missed, and later dismissed, by those who chose to remain defiant at all costs. As time eventually played out, those who assimilated and cooperated

with the powers that be grew in influence and prospered as a minority in Babylon, as the story of Daniel reveals so elegantly. In fact, many remained behind and established the Mizrahi tradition within Judaism. So all was not lost by giving up the fight! In fact, historians argue that much of Jewish culture was born during this period—stories and traditions that now are considered biblical. The deliverance they sought from Babylon in rebellion came 70 years later at the hand of Persia and it allowed many who wanted to return to Judah to join the remnant left behind there to rebuild their temple and their nation under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah.

What would have happened had Jeremiah been dismissed as a traitor? What did they gain by listening to his word and wisdom? A heritage that still exists to this day! What might be the moral of the story for us, at least in terms of how we view defiance—its value and its dangers, in whatever context we might apply it (particularly if you are a supporter of civil disobedience as I am)?

Actually, as I see it, there are four lessons to consider:

1. Read the proverbial “tea leaves” to assess whether defiance is prudent and warranted. As Jeremiah indicated, reckless defiance will be dangerous to one’s survival and long term welfare; prudent rebellion can be effective, but it must be used sparingly and acted upon in an overall context of constructive cooperation;
2. Remember that the welfare of all people is more important than the stubborn principles of a few; so when seeking constructive change, consider the broadest set of interests when campaigning for action;

3. Realize that effective change occurs by being a principled voice of reason from *within* a system, instead of just a gadfly on the outside. Reform from within tends to be more effective in the long run and more beneficial to the greatest number of people than simply resorting to rebellion. Rebellion invariably divides, whereas reform can transform. Along with that is a reality check: marginalized people are usually ignored by those in power. So work within the current system to give those without a voice and their concerns and interests a presence at the table.
4. Recognize that defiance of any type must be done first to highlight an injustice, but then to heal us from our ills—not to create more ills that harm us. Rebellion for the sake of rebellion only makes you a rebel, not a hero! Build friendships with your enemies so that they’ll trust your advice and not merely view your defiance as a chronic threat to their authority. Defy policies—yes!--but without vilifying or persecuting people, or else the “blood” of those victims will be on your own hands.

Perhaps, that is what leads us to Jesus, who defied the powers that be—not to destroy them, but to redeem them along with the world in which he lived. Defiance is always appropriate against the sins and corruption of any system—political, religious, financial, vocational, you name it—especially when it’s done not to destroy your opposition, but to hold them to account and to change their ways. Loving one’s enemies is a way to be defiantly redemptive, because it ultimately brings people to a better place and with greater trust that

lasts. When we all work together for common good, then that good has a better chance of being realized.

One would hope that we may see this happen over the next few days as our elected leaders try to avoid the federal default and end the government shutdown. It has to, or else there will be consequences that none of us will want to bear. May everyone learn the lessons of this experience, of the dangers of defiance and the need for considerate cooperation. For if they do, no one will be declared the loser, because somehow they—the protagonists and the defiant, the White House and the Congress, the Democrats and the Republicans—will have found a way that allows everyone to embrace a win.

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