

***Jesus Without Borders***  
An Easter 4 Sermon  
Acts 4:1-22; John 10:11-18  
Sunday, May 3, 2009  
by Dr. Frank Trotter

Last Sunday night, a remarkable event took place at a concert in Disney Hall in downtown Los Angeles. The featured artist for the evening was Krystian Zimerman, the famous Polish pianist who is considered among the best pianists in the world. Just before the final piece on the program, Zimerman “created a furor...when he stopped his recital to announce that this would be his last American appearance – in protest of the nation’s military policies overseas.”<sup>1</sup>

Speaking in a quiet voice, Zimerman referred to U.S. policies to which he expressed strong opposition. Among the issues he briefly mentioned were the Guantanamo Bay imprisonment of Al Qaeda suspects, and in particular two issues regarding his native land: (1) the existence of secret CIA prisons that operate inside Polish borders, and (2) U.S. consideration of installing a massive anti-Russian defense system on Polish soil. As he finished his remarks, he quietly said, “Get your hands off my country.”<sup>2</sup>

That was the first surprise of the evening, but the second occurred moments later when some members of the audience booed and yelled for him to shut up and finish the concert. About 30 or 40 others in attendance “walked out after [his] declaration, some shouting obscenities,”<sup>3</sup> while others in the audience cheered. From all accounts, it was a fairly chaotic scene for several moments.

The final surprise of the evening took place when Zimerman sat down to play his final selection – a piece by the Polish composer, Karol Szymanowski, entitled “Variations on a Polish Folk Theme.” The sonata

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica Garrison and Diane Haithman, with contributions by Mark Swed, “Krystian Zimerman to shun U.S. in protest: The Polish pianist tells a Disney Hall audience he won’t play here again, citing military policies,” *Los Angeles Times*, Tuesday, April 28, 2009, D1, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/arts/la-et-zimerman-pol28-2009apr28,0,2990695.story?page=1>. For a review of the concert, go to <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2009/04/krystian-zimermans-last-us-appearance-at-disney-hall.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

was written during the Soviet occupation of Poland in the late 1950's and is now considered to be fervently nationalistic in Poland, in much the same way that "The Star Spangled Banner" or "America the Beautiful" might be in our country. Perhaps because of the emotions of the moment, Zimmerman "played with such passion and intensity that the stunned audience gave him multiple ovations."<sup>4</sup>

Those who know Krystian Zimerman well say that his feelings have been building in intensity since shortly after September 11, 2001 when he had just entered the U.S. to perform a celebrated concert at Carnegie Hall. In a controversial incident at JFK Airport in New York, his Steinway grand piano (which traveled with him everywhere) was confiscated by the Transportation Security Administration because they thought that the glue that held the Steinway together smelled funny and might be an explosive device. Not wanting to take any chances, government officials ordered that the piano, which was valued at several hundred thousand dollars, be destroyed. Any of us who are musicians cringe at stories like this, especially in the case of a piano that was specifically built and tuned to match the gifts and artistry of a specific musician.

To avoid such incidents on U.S. tours in the future, Zimerman had a new Steinway grand built that he, himself, could completely assemble and unassemble when necessary. When he arrived at each U.S. city, he would assemble it by hand (a painstaking and lengthy process) and then unassemble it when the concert was over.

However, Zimerman had another encounter with the Transportation Security Administration three years ago when they again confiscated his new piano when he entered the U.S. for an important concert. On this occasion they did not destroy it, but they held it up for so long in customs that he had to use a borrowed piano for the concert that he had never practiced on. Was this celebrated musician targeted by the government, as some suggest? Although it is true that Zimerman is known for his strong opinions, we may never know for sure. Those who know him well suggest that he was tired of going through such exhaustive practices and uncertain treatment each time he entered the U.S.

Last Monday morning there was a range of opinions expressed on the *Los*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

*Angeles Times*' culture blog. Some who wrote in were outraged that he had chosen a concert to deliver a controversial speech. Others, however, observed that while American musicians rarely use the concert stage to express personal or political opinions, such behavior of mixing the musical and the political is not unusual in Poland. Marek Zebrowski, director of the Polish Music Center at USC, said, "There is a tradition of Polish pianists being in the middle of political events."<sup>5</sup>

The entire incident raised several issues for me: (1) the ease or difficulty artists have in traveling across U.S. borders; (2) the remarkable courage it takes for an international figure to offer a political speech that may not be welcomed in a country where he is the guest; and (3) the ability or inability of American audiences to hear a political opinion whether or not they agree with it and to accept it is the opinion of this particular individual.

In 1971, a group of French physicians became frustrated when the government of Nigeria prevented them from offering medical aid to the people in Biafra, a Nigerian state that had unsuccessfully attempted to secede from Nigeria because of economic, cultural, ethnic, and religious tensions between the majority peoples of Nigeria and the minority tribes living in Biafra. In protest, the physicians created an organization they called "Médecins Sans Frontières" (or "Medicine without Frontiers or Borders"), widely known now around the world as "Doctors without Borders." The founders of MSF believed that "all people have the right to medical care regardless of race, religion, creed or political affiliation, and that the needs of these people supersede respect for national borders."<sup>6</sup>

Since the creation of this organization, the phrase "without borders" has become widely popular around the world. If you go onto Google, you can find organizations such as "Teachers without Borders," "Mothers without Borders," "Scientists without Borders," and certainly "Music without Borders" and "Religion without Borders." There's even a group known as "Geeks without Borders." One of the web sites I visited was "Astronomers with Borders" whose opening page says, "Boundaries vanish when we look at the sky. We all share the same sky."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "Médecins Sans Frontières" (MSF)," Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%A9decins\\_Sans\\_Fronti%C3%A8res](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%A9decins_Sans_Fronti%C3%A8res).

<sup>7</sup> "Astronomers without Borders," <http://www.astronomerswithoutborders.org/>.

What is it that compels certain individuals to speak their truth regardless of consequences or national borders? What is it that enables some among us to be drawn to issues of integrity and to offer them – no matter the setting, no matter the audience?

In the third chapter of Acts, a dramatic story is recounted when Peter and John, two of Jesus' first disciples, are in the temple in Jerusalem when a man who could not walk from birth is carried in. When the man sees the two disciples, he assumes that they would give him alms for the poor or some other similar help. But Peter says, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk."

Then Peter takes the man's hands and literally pulls him to his feet. To the astonishment of everyone there (and it is a large crowd by now), the man discovers that his feet and ankles have miraculously been made strong. With the enthusiasm of a young man, he begins to run and leap for joy and to praise God. Theologian Dr. Robert Wall says that "Peter's command is not the incantation of a magician, as though healing powers were released by the mere mention of a sacred 'name,' but a believer's confession of the continuing authority of the living Jesus."<sup>8</sup>

Peter then turns to the large crowd that has gathered (several thousand by this time) and begins to preach to them about the power of God that is manifest in Jesus Christ. It does not take long, however, for the authorities to hear not only about the healing but also about the disturbance that Peter's preaching is causing. Soon a whole array of officials arrives and orders the guard to arrest the men and jail them. Dr. Wall notes that "institutional authority is always concerned with deviant voices and movements. Those in elected or established positions act in self-interest to protect the interests of those they represent."<sup>9</sup>

Even though the men are jailed, Peter's sermon has already been heard by the great multitude and word of it is already spreading quickly through Jerusalem. In fact, five thousand out of the enormous crowd became believers in Jesus Christ on the spot! (We need that kind of sermon today, don't we?)

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<sup>8</sup> Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. X* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 84. Dr. Wall is Professor of Biblical Studies at Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, Washington.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

The next day the temple authorities decide to interrogate their prisoners in an attempt at damage control. “By what power or by what name did you do this?” they ask the men. Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, preaches a second time. “Rulers and of the people, if we have been brought to trial today for helping a sick man, [and] put under investigation regarding this healing, I’ll be completely frank with you – we have nothing to hide. By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the One you killed on a cross, the One God raised from the dead, by means of his name this man stands before you healthy and whole. Jesus is ‘the stone you masons threw out, which is not the cornerstone.’ Salvation comes no other way; no other name has been or will be given to us by which we can be saved, only this one.”<sup>10</sup>

To say that the leaders were taken aback by the confidence and authority of this preacher would be a colossal understatement. They were further astonished when they realized that neither man had any training in scripture or formal education. Here were a couple of men surrounded by those who could take their life if they wished, and yet they spoke as if they felt no intimidation at all.

As the story concludes, the leaders order Peter and John to never again speak or teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter says, “Whether it’s right in God’s eyes to listen to you rather than to God, you decide. As for us, there’s no question – we can’t keep quiet about what we’ve seen and heard.”<sup>11</sup>

I recently saw a bumper sticker that read “So many Christians...so few lions.” It was a lament over what has happened to all of the bold Christians who built the church, worked for it, and sustained it across the centuries. Where are the Peters and Johns of our generation? It’s as if the authorities and culture of our time have been phenomenally successful in silencing or taming the church’s passion over its own message. Without adversaries that may threaten our very existence, contemporary Christians have become soft and pudgy.

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<sup>10</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2002), 1973.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1974.

Theologian Walter Wink believes that “[compliant] obedience has been made the highest Christian virtue”<sup>12</sup> for Christians today. Dr. Wink treasures the passage of Jesus as the good shepherd that we heard this morning from the Gospel of John but worries that “Christians have been instilled with a sheepish docility that has played into the hands of the Powers for centuries.”<sup>13</sup> As a result, we cave in when we’re urged to have brunch or play golf on Sunday morning. As a result, we are more silent than not about our deepest beliefs. As a result, we would rather go along with the culture than push back against it. Would any of us be willing to stand up like Krystian Zimmerman did last Sunday and proclaim without apology what he or she believes? Would any of us be willing to stand up like Peter and John and be willing to be imprisoned for our beliefs in Jesus Christ?

What is so remarkable about Peter is the huge contrast to how he often behaved as a disciple and how he behaves once Christ has been raised from the dead. Before the resurrection, Peter was remembered as the one who denied Jesus three times in short succession the night before the crucifixion. After the resurrection, Peter is remembered as the apostle who boldly shares without limits the good news of what God has done in Christ. It is “Jesus without borders”!

One of the young adults who has been attending our church in recent months invited two friends to come to our church on Easter Sunday – one of them was her roommate and the other was a co-worker. Both of them showed up on Easter morning here at First United Methodist. When I sent invitations out to recent visitors to come to my home last Thursday for one of my monthly Pastor’s Parties, all three of them came. Out of the total number of guests who came – 12, this one young adult was responsible for 25% of those in attendance. And she’s not even a member of the church. Yet!

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., the great jurist and member of the Supreme Court from 1902 to 1932, once said, “For I say unto you...that to think great thoughts you must be heroes as well as idealists. Only when you have worked alone / when you have felt around you are a black gulf of solitude more isolating than that which surrounds the dying man, and in hope and despair have trusted to your own unshaken will / then only can you gain the secret isolated joy of the thinker, who knows that a hundred years after he is

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Wink, “Those Obstreperous Idiots – Living by the Word,” *Christian Century*, April 13, 1994, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1058/is\\_n12\\_v111/ai\\_15150095/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_n12_v111/ai_15150095/).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

dead and forgotten men who have never heard of him will be moving to the measure of his thought / the subtle rapture of postponed power, which the world knows not because it has no external trappings, but which to his prophetic vision is more real than that which commands an army. And if this joy should not be yours, still it is only thus you can know that you have done what lay in you to do / can say that you have lived, and be ready for the end.”<sup>14</sup>

What my prayer is for all of us is indeed to be a people who find our courage to stand up and proclaim that the one who believe in, the one who died, is risen from the dead and alive eternally in all of creation. Our job is to proclaim Jesus without hesitation, Jesus without qualification, and Jesus without borders!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., quoted at <http://thinkexist.com/quotes/with/keyword/prophetic/>.