

A subversive message of peace

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April 1, 2013

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Not long ago I had a small epiphany at the airport. I was removing my jacket and boots, attempting to unzip my carryon and extract a laptop while checking my pockets for metal and nudging gray plastic bins toward a conveyor belt. I was trying not to hurry the person in front of me or delay the person behind, who waited grimly with shoes in one hand and an iPad in the other.

I started to laugh. Our collective efforts to prevent hijacking by removing belts and forfeiting sequestered tubes of toothpaste suddenly seemed absurd. The tactics of trained terrorists are unlikely to be defeated by these departure-lounge rituals.

What the rituals may accomplish, though, is to remind us to be afraid—not to feel quite secure or safe. Anywhere. They bring us face to face with uniformed homeland security personnel who are allowed no humane exchange of kindly words. Their thankless job is to regard each of us as potential threats—to make us afraid of one another and of them.

In a climate of force-fed fear, “Be not afraid” is a subversive message. In this week’s passage from Acts, the disciples are hauled up before a council of men whose collective authority would likely have intimidated most of their peers. I am struck by the peace, simplicity and boldness of the disciples’ quiet disobedience.

It seems a timely example for those who believe we have a role in resisting abuses of power in government, media, multinational corporations, schools, churches, families. Jesus calls us to live in paradox, to lose our lives to save them, to recognize when “no” is the only way to say “yes.” The disciples’ courage seems to come not

only from their sure and certain love, but also from their absolute clarity. “We must” is a simple statement of fact spoken, I imagine, without a fist in the air but rather with the deep calm that can come only from peace that passes understanding.

In that peace we, too, can walk through the bureaucratic mazes we inhabit, joining the ranks of saints who have stood against abuses of power. We can keep our compasses aligned to a true north that may lead us across some boundaries and through some mine fields, but will surely lead us home.