

WHOSE APPROVAL DO WE SEEK?

Holiday pressure, hazardous weather, crowded airports, cancelled flights -- there's a new term for it: flightmare. Perhaps you can relate to it, with holiday air travel complications fresh in your mind. Although my husband and I eschewed air travel this Christmas and instead welcomed family here (amid the unexpected challenge of no heat or lights), we did fly for Thanksgiving, joining the frazzled multitude.

Determined to be mindful of the strains on my fellow travelers and to make the best of crowding at the gate, I nodded my best introvert's welcome to the woman asking if the empty seat next to me was available. Thus, she sat -- and chattered.

She chatted up her seatmates on both sides, as well as her husband, who was seated at a telling distance. As we finally stood to board, she complimented me on the cross I was wearing. "I have a nice one at home," she said, "but I seldom wear it. These days, you just don't know how people might react."

I shared that I wear one every day to remind myself and others of Jesus, who died that we might live. It is also a way to share the gospel in a nutshell: the cross means "Jesus loves you."

She explained that she was heading to a big Thanksgiving gathering, and that she wouldn't want to offend the Jewish guests by wearing a cross. Would she be offended if any of them wore a Star of David? "Oh, no, not at all," she replied.

Boarding ended our exchange, but I hoped to give her food for thought, saying -- with eye contact and a reassuring smile --

"Don't be afraid to wear your cross." I hope to give you and myself food for thought here, by asking, "Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God?" (Galatians 1:10).

Wearing a cross is a small thing, and it goes unchallenged if not honored in my kindly part of the country, at least for now. But, in the words of singer–songwriter Bob Dylan, "the times, they are a–changin'." Religious freedom has eroded in this country to the point that, for example, praying silently in public has garnered arrest. But while the culture increasingly insists that we not offend anyone, Jesus taught otherwise. His message of loving truth offended many. It cost Him dearly; what might it cost his followers?

We may suffer disdain, or far worse (Luke 6:22). But I encourage you to read the ominous consequences of shirking what Eric Metaxas calls our "grave and fearsome responsibility" to stand firm in the faith, explicated forthrightly in his prophetic new book, *Letter to the American Church*.

With him, I implore us to shift our focus from what we fear people might think, to what we know Jesus thinks: "For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes again in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38). By contrast, Jesus also said, "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me" (Matthew 11:6).

If we are not ashamed of our faith, being convinced that God is able to guard that priceless gift and that He is invariably *for* us, we need not be intimidated by political correctness or wretched legislation (2 Timothy 1:12; Romans 8:31; Isaiah 41:10; Psalm 118:6).

Instead, may we recognize the temptation to temper our witness, and pray that we might speak up instead (1 Corinthians 10:13; 16:13–14).

May we comprehend that we do the loving thing when we share the gospel, "for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

And like faithful souls throughout the ages, when facing those who would erase God from the picture, may our serene confidence in spite of any risks be our effective testimony: "Those who look to Him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed" (Psalm 34:5).

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux