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“They were plotting to catch him at something he might say” (Luke 11:54).

Anyone following the news on the candidates for president will know that a single misstep or verbal gaffe can sink their prospects. Quotations and images go viral on social media and are often distorted or taken out of context.

Jesus was an easy target because much of what he said and did directly challenged the concept of God and attitudes toward the law held by the scribes, Pharisees and teachers representing the temple establishment. They did not have to distort his positions to accuse him of heresy and blasphemy.

They were law-and-order priests and professional theologians who could characterize Jesus as an uneducated hill country preacher with a message of love pandering to the unwashed crowds and public sinners. He broke the sabbath by doing healings and exorcisms in the synagogues. He ignored ritual purity laws and hung out with tax collectors and prostitutes. He consorted with Samaritans, talked publicly with women and helped pagans, including Romans.

Worst of all, he criticized his critics, questioning their integrity and authority, and despite all their attempts to trap him, Jesus only grew more popular with the crowds. He held their leaders accountable for the blood of prophets killed for criticizing Israel, then had the hypocrisy to build monuments to them after their deaths. Their hatred of him would lead no less than the chief priest to conclude that because Jesus was destabilizing the power arrangements they had with Rome and Herod, “it “was better for one man to die for the people than for the system to fall.”

Modern prophets have suffered the same fate, including Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr and Oscar Romero. Truth confronting power has never been easy, but those who have challenged injustice also live on as heroes and models of courage and faith. In our troubled time, there will be other martyrs, many of them among the anonymous poor who have lost their lives in pursuit of truth and justice. They are special people called to do extraordinary things. But ordinary people, like all of us, can also play a part in opposing evil and committing our small voices to make a chorus of courage that in its own time and place can change the direction of history.

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