

“What a Difference a Week Makes”
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11;
Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 15:1-15

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Palm Sunday is always a bittersweet Sunday for me. There’s a sense of celebration in this moment when Jesus enters into the city. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” they shout. There’s some acknowledgement that Jesus has been among them and has been the one who has shown care, who recognizes the value of those he’s been teaching, who has been healing the people that needed healing, and offering the encouragement and teaching that would guide them. This is a moment when that is recognized. And yet, it feels like it doesn’t take long for that moment to change.

Jesus, himself, goes in and stands in the Temple and just looks around. It feels like that moment of surveying what might come to pass. Surveying what is and what needs to be. It feels to me like people recognize that his entry is quite different than what might be expected. Some wanted him to turn his popularity into power and to use that power that had been derived from caring and valuing and healing and encouraging folks in a political or economic or military way. Jesus refused to do so. Instead, he seems to question the use of power with his teaching to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. He questions the comingling of religious and economic power when he comes into the Temple and drives those there out and says, “Don’t make my father’s house a marketplace, but a place of prayer.”

Jesus asks questions of religious power used to conform instead of to do good. The power that conformed people in rules on a Sunday, for example. Remember when he confronts the Pharisees with a man who needed healing on the Sabbath, and he said, “Is it right to do good on the Sabbath, or are the rules more important?” He didn’t add that last part, but that’s the sense of it. As he begins to address the good rather than the rule, perhaps he begins to engage them in a way that makes them uncomfortable. Why is it, after all, that they are upset with Jesus?

That hymn in Philippians talks about him being born into being human, humbling himself, coming as a servant. What gets in the way of being a servant? On one hand, they may be upset that he doesn’t spend a lot of time talking about throwing the Romans out, yet he doesn’t accept the way things are, either. But he doesn’t use the normal methods. He doesn’t want to use political, economic, or military power to solve the problems of the day. I’m sure this was disappointing to some. And we still find that to be disappointing at times. Yet his call to faithfulness to God and his popularity worried some that he was challenging those very powers.

He brings into human awareness – into the awareness of the people that he’s teaching and into the awareness of his disciples across the ages – the awareness of love and grace. As he begins to speak of a different kind of currency that is used in the kingdom of God, he challenges the powers of this world. When Caiaphas says that

Jesus must die for the sake of the nation, he points to Jesus' message of love and healing as challenging the status quo, particularly of the powerful. He's suggesting that Jesus is challenging their way of leading, challenging the belief that God has sanctified their way. Indeed, suggesting that there might be a different way.

Pilot recognizes jealousy in them – a jealousy that Jesus has a different way, that Jesus is engaging people, becoming popular and leading in a different way. It seems to me that humankind has a real struggle with that. This sense that others might be flourishing in a way that we don't feel like we are, or a fear that their flourishing might diminish our flourishing. I have to wonder whether we don't do some real atrocities because of that. You wonder why the Jews were persecuted, why the holocaust of Jews in Europe. Sometimes we just focus on how that happened over there, and yet we have our own stories. I think of the black Wall Street massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma in the 1920s. As a group begins to flourish, there is a fear that their flourishing will interfere with our flourishing.

In the midst of these kinds of struggles, in the midst of our uncertainties in the world, how do we know who to listen to and how to listen, even to Jesus? It feels to me like there are some pretty straightforward clues. When he asks the question on that Sabbath, "Is it right to do good and to heal, or not," he's helping us see a way of thinking. Does the information we have, does the way we're looking, is it about doing something good and healing, or not? Is the information we're taking in about doing what is good and healing, or not? Does it advocate for division, hatred, one's own way at the cost of other's lives or the fullness of all lives? Or does it engage us in loving our enemy?

Sometimes it feels like we have so elevated the desire for order and control that we lose sight of love and grace. Pilot asks, "What evil has he done? Why do you bring Jesus?" The story before this, as they interrogated Jesus, was about blasphemy, which is such a nebulous thing that it is easy to find a way to say it. Really, it feels like he challenged the way they thought was sanctioned by God, the way they thought God was behind them, and thus it was an affront to God.

When we make our way the way of God, using God as the one defending our way, not listening to how God challenges our way, perhaps particularly challenging our melding religious, political, economic power to protect our way, our view, our stability, our privilege, our culture—Jesus seemed to challenge these in his day and perhaps still does. That is the evil that Jesus has done, and I think we can still find problematic. Jesus is innocent of evil, but becomes the scapegoat for all those problems. If they can just get Jesus crucified, then the problems he highlights, that he represents, his popularity, will go away. We see the use of vilification, viciousness, violence, as a way to deny the challenge he represents, the alternate way he offers, and the way he challenges them to recognize that God is not behind their way.

Now that can seem kind of nebulous, but there's a way in which we struggle when we encounter those moments where we know what's right and yet it doesn't work for us.

I had a friend who was running a church and he said he had a man come in and tell him that he was a terrible leader because he was putting faithfulness ahead of the financial stability of the church. I had another friend who told me about running a children's program where one of the workers got frustrated with one of the young boys, who was a little rambunctious, and she grabbed hold of him and sat him down and scared him. Of course, the parent came and objected. The worker was really upset when that leader said she needed to apologize to that parent and to the young boy. We don't always want to do what's right because it affects how we see ourselves, what we're afraid of.

Those might seem, in some ways, what I call minor crucifixions. Minor crucifixions of the good. Minor crucifixions of what God might want us to do. And yet, they feel to me like the symptoms that describe how we're infected with the very struggle we see with Jesus. How we are infected with that desire to have whatever it might be – our privilege, our power, our comfort, our way.

It was as Jesus confronted those powers that there was the decision made that he needed to be gotten rid of. He was vilified, treated viciously, and violence was used against him. How easy it is for us to curtail our love and grace and give them only to those we want or those we feel deserve it. I wonder how ready we might be, although we seldom would say it in this way, to crucify Jesus when he challenges us, asks us to be different, to give up our comfort, to let go of our jealousy, to let go of our way of seeing things, to let go of our privilege, to become servants rather than masters.

Where do we see Jesus today? Where do we see that which or those whom we would crucify to maintain our way, our privilege, our power, our control. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, who cares, values, and heals, who invites us to do good rather than be bound by social, cultural, religious customs and power, but to be born into humility that questions our use of power. Jesus, through his call to love and grace from a position of humility, challenges our use of power and tendency to use the power of faith to enhance the political, economic, cultural, or military power that is all around us.

How easy it is to berate Jesus, to see what we are unwilling to give up, to be surprised by our biases, to want our privilege and power, to the point of questioning Jesus and to crucify that which represents for us a blasphemy of denying that our lives are somehow sanctioned by God.

As we enter this Holy Week, we are challenged to walk with Jesus into the heart of power in his society and to challenge it. Not by force, but to expose it. To expose the vilification, and the viciousness, and the violence of it and how it's used against an innocent victim to get rid of the challenge love and grace pose. We are invited to walk with him, to hear again the invitation to see the depths of human evil and look for the wonder of God's love and grace. Amen.