

Shouting Stones

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“Shouting Stones” Pilgrim Church UCC, March 20, 2016, Palm Sunday (Luke 19:28-40)

Palm Sunday is a day of sharp contrasts. A triumphal entry on a borrowed donkey. Multitudes praising God joyfully with their Hosannas while some Pharisees in the crowd ask Jesus for silence. Jesus riding into Jerusalem while if we look hard enough we can see the shadow of a cross outside of town. Yes, Palm Sunday is a complicated way to begin this Holiest Week of our Christian tradition.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is presented as a rejected prophet. Jesus taught that compassion was the central quality of God and the most important moral quality of a life centered in God.[1] Jesus taught: be compassionate as God is compassionate. There was a holiness world view at that time and Jews argued among themselves about purity laws. Jesus was right in the midst of these arguments, questioning who was “pure” and “impure”—even sharing meals with those deemed “impure” by others. This compassion got Jesus into trouble because he was smashing categories that gave meaning in the midst of Roman occupation and oppression.

After telling some of the grumbling Pharisees that even if the crowds were silent the stones themselves would shout out, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, and then cleanses the Temple itself—the holiest place in all of Israel—driving out those who had made God's house of prayer into a den of robbers. If we really listen to what's underneath the Hosannas this morning we can hear the tension. Jesus questioned the Temple sacrificial system and what it takes for a person to be righteous. Marcus Borg explains that, “The effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.”[2] Jesus waded into these religious and political questions, the questions that defined the times. And he called for compassion and he called for peace.

Imagine an excited crowd shouting, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory to the highest heaven!”[3] Some looked on with hardened hearts—asking Jesus to silence this racket. To give the Pharisees some credit there was fear here—perhaps they thought this moment was too political and the Roman Empire in all its might would retaliate. After all, the Romans were in Jerusalem in full force during Passover and there was no disturbing the peace of Rome. The crowds are shouting, “Blessed is the king. Hosanna!” One can only imagine how this might sound to Roman ears. “Hosanna” roughly translates as “save us” after all.

Make no mistake this Palm Sunday parade was a political move on Jesus' part. Jesus was defying the expectations people had of him as the Messiah who had come to save them and he was calling for peace. Remember, one of the expectations that people had of the Messiah was that he would be the ancient version of a superhero, a supernatural figure who would come to secure the victory of the Jewish nation over its oppressors. Others thought the Messiah would be a powerful spokesperson from God, almost like Moses but greater. Some thought the Messiah would be a priestly leader who could provide authoritative interpretation of God's law. Finally, there was the belief that the Messiah would be a David-like King—a political leader who would once again establish Israel as a sovereign state. But no one thought the Messiah would suffer and die on a Roman cross.[4]

So Palm Sunday is a planned political demonstration. According to the Prophet Zechariah—the king will come in, riding on a donkey and will command peace to the nations. This is exactly what Jesus does—this was a peaceful protest. Jesus is alluding to the Messiah as the Suffering Servant not the David-like King even if it's what so many people longed for in this time of oppression.

The truth is that religion and politics can have an uneasy relationship. In 2007, Barack Obama spoke at our United Church of Christ General Synod before he was even a Presidential Candidate. President Obama had been an active member of the United Church of Christ for more than 20 years in Chicago and was asked to speak on the intersection of his faith with his vocation as a politician. He wasn't the only speaker and was invited specifically because he was a UCC member at that time. The IRS notified the UCC several months later that they were initiating a church tax inquiry because "reasonable belief exists that the United Church of Christ has engaged in political activities that could jeopardize its tax-exempt status."^[5] It was a royal mess for a while, but eventually the charges were dropped. Though this scare lingers for many in our denomination.

Given our current political climate, there was a memo circulated a few weeks ago reminding UCC churches and clergy that we are allowed to take positions on public policy issues. We're allowed to take positions on public policy issues that may even be addressed by candidates in an election cycle. But we are not allowed to make statements in favor of or opposing any candidate. Issues—cool, candidates—nope is how I've always internalized "the rules."

Though it's always struck me as odd because in my Call Agreement with our congregation there is a clause that states your minister has Freedom of the Pulpit. It reads: "in accepting pastoral leadership we also accept your freedom of expression in the pulpit as it pertains to matters of faith and faithfulness according to the insight of scripture, the work of the Holy Spirit, the traditions of the United Church of Christ, and the context in which we live our lives." It's a standard statement (not that you couldn't have come up with this language), but it's important for ministers. We have freedom in our pulpits to preach about matters of the Christian faith. We have freedom in our pulpits to preach about the context in which we live our lives (aka what's happening in the world around us.) Our current political climate with specific people running for the highest office in our nation can be depressing and scary. And it's difficult to tiptoe around up here in this pulpit.

The House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church issued a Word to the Church for Holy Week that was co-signed by the Council of Conference Ministers in our United Church of Christ. The statement reminded us, "On Good Friday the ruling political forces of the day tortured and executed an innocent man. They sacrificed the weak and the blameless to protect their own status and power. On the third day Jesus was raised from the dead, revealing not only their injustice but also unmasking the lie that might makes right. In a country still living under the shadow of the lynching tree, we are troubled by the violent forces being released by this season's political rhetoric. Americans are turning against their neighbors, particularly those on the margins of society. They seek to secure their own safety and security at the expense of others. There is legitimate reason to fear where this rhetoric and the actions arising from it might take us . . . No matter where we fall on the political spectrum, we must respect the dignity of every human being and we must seek the common good above all else."^[6]

My friends, we're fooling ourselves if we think that this tricky dance between religion and politics was unique to Jesus' time. We're fooling ourselves if we think that those in political power don't sometimes put religion into a box over here. This isn't me saying that's good or bad necessarily but it is the reality. Yet the Church cannot remain silent when the inherent dignity and worth of people who are created in the very image of God is called into question.

We're in good company when we speak up. Because Jesus' Palm Sunday actions were political. His actions were about 1st Century public policy issues and engaging in civil disobedience against those in power in the Temple who were working with the Romans to oppress the people. Jesus rides into town on a lowly creature, palm branches wave in the air, shouts of Hosanna erupt from the crowd, the role of Messiah is rewritten, and the king of kings advocates for peace and for compassion.

Jesus taught: be compassionate as God is compassionate. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. Your faith has saved you. The kingdom of God is among you. Do not be afraid.

Jesus taught controversial lessons, uncomfortable lessons—he paid the price for taking those moral stands. And the punishment was harsher than losing one's tax exempt status. The ruling political forces did kill an innocent man, sacrificing the weak and blameless to protect their own status and power. There are so many aspects of Jesus to admire—but it's his guts that get me every Holy Week. The guts it took to ride into Jerusalem and tell anyone with ears to hear that God desires compassion for all people. At a time when people were calling for violence Jesus said, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!"[7]

May we have the eyes to see the legacy that Jesus left us on the last week of his life. May we have the guts to truly walk with him to the Upper Room and the Garden and the Trials and the Cross and the Tomb. And no matter what, do not be afraid. Amen.

[1] Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith, 46.

[2] Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, 52.

[3] Luke 19:38, NRSV.

[4] Dr. Benjamin Valentine, Systematic Theology II, Andover Newton Theological School, Spring 2008

[5] Ben Guess, "Obama's General Synod speech prompts IRS to investigate UCC's tax-exempt status," February 25, 2008, <http://www.ucc.org/obama-speech-in-2007-prompts-1>

[6] A Word to the Church, Holy Week 2016, from the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church and co-signed by the Council of Conference Ministers of the United Church of Christ.

[7] Luke 19:42.