

Worlds Collide
Matthew 21:1-17
Northminster Presbyterian Church
Rev. Michael D. Kirby
April 14, 2019

Note: On Sunday, due to concerns about the length of the service, the first 6 paragraphs were substantially shortened and reformatted on the fly to concentrate only on Texas, so this differs from the audio version.

I'll admit it. You already know it. I'm a political junkie. Watching what lawmakers do fascinates me. One particular phenomenon that has captured both my pastor interest and my policy wonk interest has been the fascination state legislatures have with Sharia Law, that is the religious laws of certain strains of Islam. Sharia Law as recently reintroduced in the Kingdom of Brunai, including the possibility of the death penalty for marital infidelity or same sex intimacy.

Some pertinent information, According to the Pew Research Center, New Jersey is the state in the United States with the largest percentage of its population being adherents of Islam. How large is the Islamic population in New Jersey? 3 percent. Arkansas, DC and New York are at 2 percent...and every other state is 1 percent or less.

Nevertheless, for the last decade, state legislatures have been obsessed with banning Sharia law. In every year since 2010, at least 13 states have considered anti-Sharia law legislation. 2011 was the worst—40 states considered such legislation, those the vast majority didn't pass. In 2017, the number was just 14. But, in every year since 2018, except 2016, at least one state has actually passed these laws.

Not surprisingly, none of the laws have EVER been used to block a single act or action since they were passed.

Oddly, at the same time legislatures have been making sure that no city or state can adopt laws to recognize Islamic religious laws, 36 states have considered and passed Religious Freedom Restoration Acts—those acts generally designed to prevent anti-discrimination laws from over-impinging on individual's or businesses' religious beliefs. Lots of folks have called them the wedding cake laws...though they are much broader than that. A bill introduced in Iowa 2 months ago would allow any business in the state the right to refuse services to anyone based on religious beliefs, including hotels, apartments, cab drivers, etc. There are concerns that, if it is passed, it could be used to discriminate not just against LGBT people, but the disabled and immigrants.

The Iowa Bill is similar to a law in Indiana that celebrates its 4th birthday this month. The ironic thing about that law and that bill? They are so broadly worded, that they actually allow the use of Sharia law by business owners to justify refusing to serve anyone who doesn't comply with their interpretations of those laws.

Crazy, huh? Sometimes when we want something very badly, our vision gets distorted, or we go a little crazy, and our expectations and our fears send us in a direction that looks a lot like hate--a lot like oppression.

Take those folks in Jerusalem on this day. Matthew tells us that there were two groups we need to talk about that day, who saw what was going on.

Those who were "the crowds" were, we presume, Jesus' followers--those who are throwing their cloaks on the road and waving palms and cheering this one that some of them have been following for almost three years. He is their new hope. Some of them want a national leader who will throw the Roman's out and some of them see him only as a Spiritual leader, a Messiah of the heart. We can identify with them, right?

But, there is also a much larger group who only gets scant mention here, but they will become much more important later in the week. Matthew tells us

about “the whole city.” These are the folks who have lived in Jerusalem under the peaceful, yet oppressive boot of Caesar and the authoritarian rule of their King-in-name-only, Herod. And the City? They aren’t shouting with joy; they are, in Matthew’s words, bewildered; stirred-up; confused, depending on the translation. The Whole City is confused.

They won’t be very confused in about 4 days. They will shout as we will in about 25 minutes: “Crucify him!”

They will go from bewilderment to violence--from being confused and frightened to being terribly destructive, thinking they are doing the right thing. More than a few religious commentators have compared that mob to the angry rhetoric that has surrounded those anti-Sharia and pro-religious freedom laws.

And here’s one of the frustrating things about that analogy--it requires that we consider what happened to the crowds? Those that today throw down their coats and palms with joy. Where are they in few days? Some will see he’s not the Messiah they want and join the throngs calling for his blood; but many will flee; will desert Jesus. Even many of his dearest friends will flee and Peter will deny him.

On this Palm Passion Sunday, Matthew invites us to have a serious conversation about what it means to be the church in unsettling times. Are we ones who will be fair-weather followers, happy to be a part of the show, the parade of welcome for the Jesus we want, but fleeing when we find out he demands more of us than that show? Are we the ones who find everything so confusing, who will look for scapegoats for our fears and find them in the vulnerable who we will turn on with derision, snark and anger and violence?

Or, can we really pay attention to what today and indeed our very lives are about? Looking not to the parade and the pomp and circumstance; not to

palms and cloaks, but to the one who enters the city today. This Jesus with his extra donkey, enough animals to hold him and our expectations, perhaps.

But, can we see past those expectations--past the Jesus that we want to the one who really comes?

Some were calling for a military leader, but as you may remember, I've previously said about Luke's version of this day, Matthew directly quotes from the Old Testament Prophet Zechariah to describe Jesus' entry as fulfilling prophecy. The specific prophecy quoted is from Zachariah 9, but that prophecy also says about the one who will arrive. "He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem. And the battle bow shall be cut off and he shall command peace to the nations."

This is hardly the description of a coming warrior king. Thus, it appears that the reference to triumph and victory is not the result of war, but the result of its elimination (Zech. 9:9). This king who will "cut off" chariots, war-horses, and battle bows from Jerusalem commands only peace (Zech. 9:10).

So cool. Peacemaking Jesus is coming. And then...

And then he goes into the temple and his very first actions are to throw out the money changers. Now, the money changers were there to fulfill the Laws of Moses...and some use this as a way to slam Jews and to say Jesus rejected them. But, to be blunt, that's just ignorant. Matthew's Jesus is very Jewish in his self-identity.

So, why does Jesus go directly from this moment of great triumph (the city's bewilderment notwithstanding) to a moment of confrontation? Matthew makes it clear that Jesus' disruption of the Temple is one of the reasons he will be dead by Friday night. So, why confront things so directly?

Maybe Bonhoeffer can help us to understand. Seventy-four years ago this week, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was put to death by the Nazi

regime for his very minor part in a major failed plot to assassinate Hitler. Many people of his day questioned why a religious man would be involved in planning such a violent act. Indeed, why he would insist upon the church activating resisting the Nazi regime at all?

In his Letters and Papers from Prison, Bonhoeffer notes
“Our church, which has been fishing in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is not capable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to mankind and to the world.”

Bonhoeffer was lamenting the compromises the church had made with the Nazi regime that made their credibility to proclaim the gospel zero...he goes on to note that the only way German church could escape this compromised fate was through “Prayer and Righteous Action.”¹

Jesus sees capitulation with Rome, and resorts to righteous action. After all, let’s think about this for a moment. What happens when people are buying their sacrifices right there inside the temple door? What happens when I can only afford a dove and you buy a goat to sacrifice? It divides us, right there in the church--the haves and the have nots, neatly on display right in the place where all are to be equal before God.

On this day, Jesus enters Jerusalem, and our lives, to proclaim a new reign--one that rejects violence, indeed overcomes it. And, he rejects division and exploitation.

In a world where people are showing their Christianity by passing laws to allow Christians to reject others, sewing division, it makes me wonder. What tables would Jesus overturn today? Who would be the cheering crowd? Who would be the confused and volatile city? I can imagine, and I think you can too.

¹ D. Bonhoeffer, Letters and Paper from Prison (1954; New York: Touchstone, 1971 reprint), p. 172.

This week, we are reminded that standing up to that kind of fear and division and confusion often has a cost. It cost Bonhoeffer and Jesus their very lives, but for both the sacrifice was worth it because the church and the world they loved were worth the rejection and the sacrifice.

Today is not about our condemning the crowd, the city, or wherever we place ourselves and others today as the faithful--the fearful or the confused. No, today is a day to turn our eyes away from the pomp of the parade and away from slavery to our own fears and confusions, and to look at him--look to him--the one who enters the city and our hearts to proclaim a world of peace for all the nations; the one who declares the temple, the dwelling place of God, is a place where that peace can start, and where things that divide us and allow us to exploit one another have no place.

And since we proclaim that the Spirit of Christ now dwells in us, that means we, too, are that place where peace can start; where division and exploitation have no place.

As we prepare to Journey with Jesus through the rejection, the fear, the death and the new life that are coming. Surely that is good news. On this day worlds collide, but the one that lives on, ultimately, is the one that gives new hope for all, wills peace and welcome for all. Thanks be to God.