

“A Different Way”

Sermon by Glenn A. Brumbaugh

Palm Sunday, Year C,

14th April, 2019

Luke 19:28-40 NIV / Luke 20:9-19 NRSV

So this week we come to the end of our Lenten journey with Jesus through parables.

We've arrived with him in Jerusalem,

with all the fanfare we've come to associate with Palm Sunday.

Though it's interesting to note that Luke's version of this story

doesn't mention palms at all,

just people throwing their coats on the ground to line his path.

But tradition is tradition, so we still have our palms to wave.

And tradition can be important.

It gives us structure and stability, a sense of familiarity so we know what to expect,

how things are going to work.

Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem has brought him to the center of the Jewish faith tradition.

This is where the Temple is, the priesthood and the scribes,

and many of the Pharisees.

It's the capital city of Judea, the center, where tradition is kept,

and where tradition maintains the status quo.

It works for them.

It's kept this religious and political machine running

since they rebuilt the Temple

after returning from exile a few centuries earlier.

Drawing on this tradition, Jesus sends his disciples out to get a donkey colt to ride on.

It's pretty clear throughout his public ministry

that Jesus has a pretty good grasp of Jewish prophetic writings.

He knows Zechariah 9 prophecies,

“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious,

lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Coming from Jericho, he comes over the Mount of Olives to do so,

also calling on Zechariah 14,

where God comes to stand on the Mount of Olives

to redeem Jerusalem in apocalyptic battle.

Jerusalem may be the center of “tradition”

but Jesus is certainly good at drawing on that tradition for his own purposes as well.

He pulls from these prophecies to fit into the messianic expectations

that people had for how their savior would arrive,

but that's the extent to which he fills that mold.

They are expecting some great display of divine might

like the rest of those Zachariah passages relate:

land being split apart,

Israel's enemies being scattered and destroyed,

the captive people of Judah set free.

After all, that's what common tradition traditionally expected.

Yet he instead draws on Isaiah's suffering servant imagery,
one who is humble and suffers in order to bring salvation.

But on this triumphant Sunday,
they only see this messiah entering as expected on a donkey foal,
with his disciples singing his praises, calling him Lord, and king.

The city was brimming with Jews from all around, in town for Passover.

If you could get there, it was the best place
to observe one of the most important holidays of the religious calendar.

I'm sure there were many in the crowd
who did not benefit from the "traditional way" of doing things,
who were from a different side of the tracks
from those in the temple who were trying to hush all this commotion up.

The religious authorities were concerned about Jesus,
not only as a potential threat to the traditions that kept them in power,
but also because of the quite different procession
entering from the other side of Jerusalem.

While Jesus was leading
his humble procession among the commoners from the East,
Pilate would have been leading a grand military procession
of Romans from his coastal base to the West.

They don't want the Romans to hear of a competitor king
to challenge their lackey vassal king Herod Antipas.

Yet Jesus tells them that even the stones would cry out if the crowd was silent.

And those stones have seen a lot over the years:

invasions and bloodshed, exile and return, oppression and suffering.

Now God's response and salvation was passing by and over them.

Hope had finally arrived.

After Jesus arrives in the Temple complex,

he teaches to the crowd and tells the parable we read this morning about the vineyard,

which again draws on the teachings of the prophets in Isaiah 5.

In that passage, Israel is described as God's vineyard

in which only bad grapes grew.

Certainly in our parable today the owner of the vineyard is also a clear allusion to God.

The owner sends servants to collect his share of the profits,

whom the tenants reject and abuse,

much in the same way those in power dealt with Israel's prophets.

Then the owner sends his own beloved son

whom the tenants kill thinking they will get his inheritance.

Like the other parables in our Lenten journey,

there is yet another lens we can look at this parable through.

While the parable is an allusion to Jesus' imminent death,

it is also a window into a different view of atonement,

that God sent Jesus, knowing that he would be rejected.

God sent Jesus like the landlord in our parable, with a message for the tenants.

Jesus was sent to proclaim the reign of God.

And he didn't come as a son of kings,

as a royally anointed first-born of David's human line.

He was sent from the margins, from Nazareth in backwater Galilee,

the lowly son of a carpenter.

He is sent from the margin to the very center of traditional power.

Theologian Rebecca Chopp explains the dynamic between the center and the margins in her article "When the Center Cannot Contain the Margins."

The center refers to the dominant order

and the margins refer to those alienated from the power of the center.

Chopp argues that speaking from the position of marginality
requires imagination;

therefore something unimaginable in the center,

can come from this decentered location.

Throughout history, new discourse and creative ideas

have come from the periphery,

often changing the course of history

by altering the paradigms

that underlie social reform and transformation.

Think of the Civil Rights movement, union-led labor law reform,
the Protestant Reformation;

these events did not start in the center of power,

because they challenged that center's sense of normality,

that group's sense of security.

For this reason, she argues

that we often need to celebrate our “marginalized” position,
reminding us of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1,
“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise;
God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.”

But the marginalized are not to be romanticized.

To stand in that position generates much pain, struggle, hard work, suffering,
and even the cross.

The crowd in today's story shouts “Peace.”

They have heard about the miracles that Jesus performed.

The people's cries of yearning, hoping, and longing fill the road to the center.

Their cries are for deliverance and peace,
which means a radical reordering and transformation of society.

The road to Jerusalem is a long one,

from the peaceful entry to the most turbulent moment
of the cross, death, and resurrection.

This journey shows what often happens
when the center of power and tradition meets those from the margins of society.

The question we need to ask ourselves is where do we fit in?

Are we like Jesus, walking in the margins,

or have we moved to the center,
and embraced the power of the traditions we find there
that make us feel comfortable and secure,
while keeping others at the margins?

Jesus, after quoting Psalm 118, that the stone rejected has become the cornerstone,
declares that all those who fall on that stone will be broken.

When we fail to reach out to, or worse, reject those on the margins
that God has always included,
we risk breaking apart and losing our mission.

Jesus demonstrates a different way than that of the center,
than that of the traditions we are tempted to cling to for our own security.

As the tenants of the vineyard today,
how do we react to the messengers that are sent today.

God, the landlord, still sends prophets.

Those who call out on behalf of those on the margins:

the poor, the immigrants, legal or not, the oppressed:

those of color,

or different sexuality or gender identities,

those in prison,

the least of these in our culture's pecking order.

And how would we react if his son was sent to us today,

a brown skinned man born in the West Bank of Palestine?

As tenants of this vineyard, how can we make sure our vines produce bountifully,

so that the landlord doesn't remove us?

We're called to reach those in need, whatever that need may be.

We know this soil has potential, we only need to look at our history to see that.

We just need to find new varieties and methods

to produce fruit that may be different from what we've produced in the past.

I pray that we can seek the guidance of the Spirit to lead us to new fields

where we can be the successful vintners we are all called to be.

May we find our way back to join with our God at work in the margins

where we can reimagine the promise of Palm Sunday for our time. Amen.