

Lectionary 26 A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

September 27, 2020

Matthew 21:23-32; Philippians 2:1-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Next Sunday is October 4th, Saint Francis Day. So we are going to remember Saint Francis and creation. And a couple of weeks after that it's Saint Luke's Day. Then Reformation Sunday. Then All Saints'. The end of the church year will be here on November 22nd. So after today, there are eight Sundays left in the church year. And it looks like on at least four of those Sundays, we will be detouring from the main lectionary road. But if we didn't observe those lesser festivals, occasions, and commemorations— if we just stuck to the lectionary road that is laid before us, then including today we would have nine stories from the last four days of Jesus' life. Today's gospel reading takes place on the day after Jesus entered Jerusalem. The day after Palm Sunday, although nobody can say for sure that Palm Sunday was actually on Sunday.

The point is, today's Sunday gospel, and the eight that come after it, if we went by the book, are sequentially teachings of Jesus from the last four days of his life before his crucifixion. And virtually all of these teachings take place in controversies. Jesus debating and disputing with religious authorities. According to Matthew, Jesus rode in to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday— except we don't know for sure if it was a Sunday— and attacked the moneychangers and all of the merchants in the temple. "The whole city was in turmoil," Matthew reports (21:10). It was Passover week, the holiday that was the greatest trigger for political violence. For insurrection by some Jews. For armed suppression by the Romans. A powder keg. Passover week. And what happens in today's gospel is day two of Jesus poking the grizzly bear.

And in the piece of this story that we have before us this morning, Jesus is in fine form against his opponents. The parable of the two sons— or the two bad boys, if you like— is sandwiched between remarks about John the Baptist, in which Jesus is performing magnificent jiu-jitsu on the chief priests. They are trying to trap him. But he traps them. Jiu-jitsu. "Float like a bumblebee, sting like a bee," in the immortal words of Mohammed Ali. Jesus emerges victorious from the debate. But in four days he'll be hanging on a cross. He's poking the grizzly bear. Entering Jerusalem like that, on a donkey like that, was poking the grizzly. Attacking the activities in the temple was poking the grizzly. Teaching in the temple publicly is poking the grizzly. Humiliating the authorities in public debate is poking the grizzly. In Matthew's gospel, after two long chapters of this, the authorities give up. They'll have to get him at night, when the crowds are not around.

Jesus chose to go Jerusalem. And Jesus chose to spend the days that we now call "holy week"

poking the grizzly. Matthew chapter 21: poking the grizzly. Matthew chapter 22: poking the grizzly. Matthew chapter 23: poking the grizzly. Matthew chapter 24: poking the grizzly. Matthew chapter 25: poking the grizzly. Jesus chose this path. It only takes two chapters for the grizzly to shred him to pieces. We call *those* two chapters, “The Passion According to Matthew.” But it took a lot of poking to get there.

Why did Jesus choose to do it this way? And if it was part of the plan of the Creator, the Father, then why did it happen *THIS* way? There is a lot of eloquence in the Christian tradition about Jesus dying on the cross so that Christians would be saved. John 3:16. God gave his only son so that believers could have eternal life. Very succinct. I fear that too many Christians are only able to see Jesus through the lens of John 3:16. In my moments of cynicism, I sometimes picture a vending machine. God puts quarters in, and a packaged snack drops out. God gave his only son, and we get a treat. That glosses over the end of Jesus’ life in ways that the New Testament itself does not. The horror and the shock of the crucifixion— what Paul called a scandal, a stumbling block— is so easily reduced to a pill. Take this pill, and all will be fine. Quarters placed into a vending machine. A packaged snack plunks out into the tray below.

Interestingly, we have sentences from Paul this morning, Sentences that we read every Good Friday, sort of out of context. But today we read them in their context. And Paul describes the death of Jesus— “even death on a cross”— and the humiliation and suffering that went with that. Jesus did not *have* to do this, Paul suggests. He did not regard his equality with God as something to be exploited. But he emptied himself. He allowed himself to be treated as less than he actually was. Paul does *not* draw a line to our salvation. Jesus’ death isn’t a reward for you, or a reward for me. The snack does not plunk out of the vending machine.

Instead, according to Paul, God exalted Jesus, God celebrated Jesus. God ratified the self-sacrifice of Jesus as the map of his heart. In context, Paul is telling the church, the Philippians, that this ought to shape our lives. Paul calls this “the mind of Christ.” *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.* Christ Jesus *deserves* honor and glory and might, like we say in so many of our songs and canticles that are based upon the New Testament. But Christ Jesus relinquished what he was owed in order to give life and hope to others. That is the “mind” of Christ Jesus. Forget about selfishness, ambition, conceit. Regard others as better than yourselves. Try to ignore your own interest. Paul says: “Have the mind of Christ.”

By coincidence, Paul’s words fall alongside our gospel reading this morning. For me, that’s a happy coincidence. If you were to only read John 3:16, then you might have a vending machine view of Jesus’ death on the cross. Quarters plunk into the machine. Snack drops out of the bottom. God gave his Son. Plunk, plunk. We get a ticket to heaven. I hope you don’t think that. But given a lot of the popular Christian messages out there today, I can see how you might.

If you were to only read Paul’s words today, you might think— as Friedrich Nietzsche did— that

Jesus' death on the cross is about beating yourself up. About letting people walk all over you. I hope you don't think that, either. But given a lot of the popular Christian messages out there today, I can see how you might.

The Church's worship offers nine weeks of Jesus being provocative. Nine weeks of Jesus poking the grizzly. Nine weeks of Jesus' jiu-jitsu. Nine weeks of the church year. *Five* chapters of Matthew's gospel. Jesus laid down his life. According to Matthew, he laid down his life in such a way that he exposed the hypocrisy and pretension of his society. He laid bare the lies of organized religion. He exposed the hypocrisy of his society and its authorities.

Our participation in the kingdom of God challenges us to have the "mind of Christ." The mind of Christ challenges us to set aside our pride and our privilege. But the mind of Christ also challenges society. Jesus poked the grizzly. Jesus made sure that his words and actions confronted those in high places. You should have the mind of Christ. I should have the mind of Christ. We should have the mind of Christ. But this is not just about overcoming our personal pride and arrogance. The mind of Christ would also challenge the pride and arrogance of the society around us. Amen.