

April 13, 2014

Matthew 21: 1-11

¹When they neared Jerusalem, having arrived at Bethphage on Mount Olives, Jesus sent two disciples ²with these instructions: “Go over to the village across from you. You’ll find a donkey tethered there, her colt with her. Untie her and bring them to me. ³If anyone asks what you’re doing, say, ‘The Master needs them!’ He will send them with you.”

⁴This is the full story of what was sketched earlier by the prophet:

⁵Tell Zion’s daughter,
“Look, your king’s on his way,
poised and ready, mounted
On a donkey, on a colt,
foal of a pack animal.”

⁶The disciples went and did exactly what Jesus told them to do. ⁷They led the donkey and colt out, laid some of their clothes on them, and Jesus mounted. ⁸Nearly all the people in the crowd threw their garments down on the road, giving him a royal welcome. Others cut branches from the trees and threw them down as a welcome mat. ⁹Crowds went ahead and crowds followed, all of them calling out, “Hosanna to David’s son!” “Blessed is he who comes in God’s name!” “Hosanna in highest heaven!”

¹⁰As he made his entrance into Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken. Unnerved, people were asking, “What’s going on here? Who is this?”

¹¹The parade crowd answered, “This is the prophet Jesus, the one from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Philippians 2: 5-11

⁵Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. ⁶He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. ⁷Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human*! ⁸Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion.

⁹Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, ¹⁰so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, ¹¹and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon – “Walk in My Shoes

Many of you in your high school English classes had to read Harper Lee’s “To Kill a Mockingbird”. It is one of those seminal novels of the 20th Century. In the novel is this line: “You never really know a man until you understand things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” Now it’s said that Harper Lee got her idea for this particular statement, from a proverb that most historians date back to the Cherokee tribe in North America. That proverb is “Don’t judge a man until you walk a mile in his shoes.” When he used that in “To kill a Mockingbird’ it became much more popular.

I’ve been reading this passage from Philippians and ruminating on it... I kept thinking about what Paul says about Jesus, that Jesus became human like us – walked in our shoes. Often times a sermon with the best of intentions doesn’t get written when you want it to, it gets written when it’s ready to be written. At about 3 am was a movie ‘Black Like Me’ which was published in 1964. It was written by a journalist from Texas, John Howard Griffin, in the late 1950’s. The civil rights movement was really generating energy and violence, Klu Klux Klan was becoming more active in the southern US. Griffin wondered what it was like to be black and in the south. He went to Fort Worth to a magazine editor, which was published, edited and was written by whites for a black audience. He approached the publisher and said I’d like to darken my skin and live as a black man in the south. I’ll write articles for your magazine. The publisher thought this was a very dangerous idea, but Griffin kept pushing the idea. He found a dermatologist in New Orleans, who had a technique for darkening the skin; a semi-permanent technique. So he had his skin darkened and lived New Orleans for 6 months as a black man. He sent these articles to this magazine in Fort Worth and then put them all together in a memoir which was published in 1964 and then made into a movie. He wanted to experience first-hand the obstacles and hard-ships of being black in America so that he may understand what life is like for blacks. It can be seen on Netflix.

In the end Griffin explicitly argues that love and tolerance are the only catalysts capable of changing society for the better. He is especially opposed to violence and the reactionary black supremacist movement typified by Malcom X which he considers another form of racism likely to end in more violence and more misunderstanding. His conclusion is: it will only get better with love and tolerance and fighting the violence of the oppression, the racism of the whites, by the kind of counter racism that Malcom X was prompting, violence against violence isn’t going to work.

If you’ve been listening for the last 4 Sundays, that is exactly the premise of Derek Flood. God got into our skin, walked in our shoes, in Jesus, to discover fully what it means to be human. God in Jesus, in that experience, tells us again and again by word and deed that love and tolerance is the way that we must live. That violence against

violence will never succeed. I was profoundly grateful that in my channel surfing I saw this, because this is a wonderful example that we can all perhaps touch on, of what Derek Flood has been trying to help us see about the cross. What John Howard Griffin realized was that as a white man it would be impossible for him to understand what it was like to live as a black in the south. What he discovered was the only way to change the world for the better would be through love.

This getting into someone's skin is another one of those nasty, difficult, theological terms, it's called the incarnation. If anyone is offended by this comic... it's Patrick's fault. It's 3 parents riding on animals and the lady on the left says "Well if it isn't Joseph and Mary" and on the back of her animal it says "Our son is an honour student" the middle one says "Our son is in medical school" and the third one says "Our son is God". Jesus isn't somebody separate from God, Jesus is God. The incarnation is about how God walked in our shoes; got under our skin. And what Jesus accomplished in doing that; what God came to understand in doing that is empathy. Empathy is different and distinct from sympathy. Empathy is what you feel in yourself, because you've gone through a similar experience. Sympathy is what you have when you look from the outside, the experience of another. So when God in Jesus got under our skin, what God was able to achieve was empathy for humanity not sympathy. So that Hollywood notion of God, way, way in the distance on a cloud looking down, like a nasty sniper, is not at all the story that we have in the gospel about Jesus' life. The incarnation tells us that God is here among us and when somebody 'walks in our shoes' then the response to us is much more authentic and it is not a projection from afar. When I was in Africa in the shanty town, the last thing I should have said was 'I know exactly what you are going through' that was inauthentic because I had no idea.

It is the incarnation that Paul is trying to explain to the Philippians. They're having a squabble. Now depending on what source you read, there are a number of things that could have been at work. People met in people's homes. Christian communities formed around the homes of women... you know what it's like if Mrs. Smith has a party, and Mrs. Jones has a party, who gets invited to which party. These 2 women were at each other's throats. Paul is writing to explain who Christ is, and what Christ's way is; and how we should follow in that way.

I was reading another commentary and the comment made was "When Paul wrote deeply theological passages he did not write them to seminarians or church leaders he wrote them to people in congregations." As we've been trudging through this season of Lent digging deeply into these complex theological concepts. We're doing what Paul was trying to get the people in the church to do, to understand this stuff, because when you get this so much of the other stuff of faith that is sometimes tough to get our heads

around, starts to make real sense. That is what Paul wanted us to do, to know our faith but to have it make sense to us as we're living day to day.

So Paul in this passage of Philippians tells that community that's fighting, squabbling amongst themselves. They have to get their heads around the incarnation, what it means for God to take on the form of a human being because that's the only way we are going to understand God's way. Inversely in Jesus, God comes to fully understand the joys and pains of being human. We often forget that side of it. This is how we come to understand God but it is also the way that God comes to understand us more fully.

Susan Jones teaches at Duke Divinity School. She explains the incarnation this way: Through the incarnation, Jesus serves as a counter example to those in the garden, who for their own selfish gain, "grasp" at likeness to God. In his self-emptying" Jesus does not see equality with as something to be used for his own advantage, but as an offering for others, even suffering and death on a cross. This humility is not humiliation; nor is the obedience blind. Rather they are expressions of faith and trust in the gracious and loving character of God. The error we make is that we see Jesus as a victim of our sins rather than a servant healing our pain and restoring our relationship with God. God's coming into humanity; God's walking in our shoes, was a way to heal us and a way to make our relationship with God closer. This traditional way of looking at the cross as the sign of the punishment that Jesus had to take for our sins really doesn't get at the heart of what Paul's theology was in the first century of the Christian era. Paul doesn't talk about Jesus dying for our sins; he talks about Jesus living amongst us. It's an incarnational Jesus that Paul focuses on. That the purpose of Jesus, this emptying out to be fully human is so that God modern priest

If you read the obits you can tell the people who trace their roots to somebody famous. They make a big deal out of it. The Philippians community was like that, status was really important to them. Paul said this is your way, but if you look at the life of Jesus, he doesn't hold onto status. You have to let go of that or you won't understand what the incarnation is all about. There was no escape hatch for the incarnation. God was committed to being fully human and that meant all the way to that cross. The one thing we all know as human beings, the one certainty, is that we will all die. In the incarnation God became human, walked in our shoes, got in our skin, all the way to the one thing that cannot be avoided. Death means broken relationships. So there is the cross, God goes fully to that black, dark spot and says this is not the end. Until you understand the humanness, none of the rest makes sense.

The way of Jesus is humility, not humiliation, pouring himself out, taking on our place, because status doesn't help or change things for the better. The only thing that made

things better was love and tolerance. Jesus filled himself with our lives, he became a human vessel and in that humanity Jesus showed us what God is like.

Derek Flood who has prompted all of this very very deep reflection this Lent says: “The way of loving our enemies, dying to self, the way of the cross, transforms both our lives and those around us and breaks the destructive cycle of sin and hostility. This notion of servant hood in Jesus is the way that the gap between us and God gets put back together. Servant hood is finding comfort in the uncomfortable. God did not become human in order to finally understand and relate to our suffering but to demonstrate to us that he has always understood it, felt every tear, known every doubt, more than we know ourselves. God came down to us, not expecting us to rise above our suffering or to deny it but knelt beside the empty faces and cried with us.

The incarnation, God coming amongst us, in the person of Jesus was purposeful and it was intentional and it declares the cross to be a component of a greater more complex story of divine love for us. Not judgment, not sin, not shame.

Jesus calls us to follow him in caring for others, in speaking life into people’s hearts. This is not a demand of a God in the sky but a God who has made himself a servant and beckons us to serve too and join him down on his knees amongst the wounded. If you are wounded God is kneeling over you, and loves you more than you can imagine and places no demands on that love. But that same love urges us, calls us to follow, to participate with him. An imperative of the heart born of the gospel of love, it’s a hard journey filled with deep joy, incomprehensible peace and rock solid hope. But also with trouble, darkness and tears. It’s a journey we never walk alone. More things to ruminate on as we move slowly now through Holy week. AMEN