

Nourishment for the Journey

Ruminations on Matthew 21.1-17

We forget, or deny, that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was as a political dissident. He came to shine a light on the powers that be for their corruption and robbery of the poor. For him, to be spiritual was to be political. He would have nothing to do with the now popular idea that spirituality is a personal thing one can do all by oneself. Spirituality had to reflect one's values – especially as expressed in, and for, the community.

To be spiritual, for Jesus, meant not turning a blind eye to the oppressed, nor to the oppressors and the system of unjust laws that impoverish people and then blame them for their poverty. He talked more about unjust economic and political realities than any other topic – by far.

His turning the tables in the temples was his indictment against the corruption and greed of those in power and the injustice of their methods that created, and further disadvantaged, the poor and powerless. Telling the money changers, "You have made (the Temple) a den of robbers," is clearly all about economic exploitation. But this offended Jesus' spirit and sense of decency, as he understood the values of how God wanted us to be in relationship with one another. When people are being cheated, this is a spiritual matter – going to the very heart of how we are to treat one another.

Spirituality for him was thus all that he was; including his relationships to others, the society, and its government and laws. He had no conception, as many do now, that you could believe one thing and act in another way. One's virtues and values influenced all that one perceived, thought, felt, said, and did. To say you value something but then act differently is not only hypocritical and cowardly, but reveals a complete lack of spiritual integrity.

And this is precisely why our society, and much of "American Christianity," totally misunderstands who Jesus was and the way he lived his life. We like to have it both ways, straddle the fence, and see Jesus as a comforting bosom to rest ourselves rather than a disquieting social justice advocate who prods us to protest – with voice, with finances, and even with our lives.

The willingness to put one's life on the line for the cause of justice, to show that one's love for people and their fair treatment is worth the risk of death itself, is what Jesus revealed by his life and his crucifixion. For Jesus, it is better to stand opposed to injustice than to be silent and complicit with it – even if it means giving up one's life for the cause. To cower in fear at the threats of the powerful is to lose one's soul. The only way to gain life in the midst of such vile injustice may be to lose it.

Jesus didn't die, as many falsely understand, as a sacrifice necessitated by God for the redemption of our sins. That would make God out to be an evil tyrant – one who would incite injustice on an innocent one so as to create justice for the many guilty ones, something antithetical to all that Jesus taught by word and deed as he came to the defense of the powerless time and time again. The blind man, leper, woman at the well, man possessed, and woman caught in adultery were all the outcasts of society. He did not ignore them to come to the aid of the majority, but rather attended to them specifically because they were the ones who were most affected by the injustices of society.

Rather, Jesus chose to live and die to bring light to the cause of justice in the face of barbaric injustice. His way is to be our way. We, too, are called to take up our own crosses raised against the injustices of our society. Jesus didn't say "praise me and live" but "follow me" and, if necessary, die for these values that were in me that can be in you as well. The saving grace of Jesus is not that he died for our sins, but died showing us how not to sin.

We aren't saved because of what he did on the cross, but by how he lived his life when faced with the cross. He'd rather die doing the right thing than live doing the wrong thing. His words that those who lose their life for his sake will gain it are illuminating. "For his sake" means by his own values, not merely a profession of belief in him. And the word "belief" when he says "believe in me," actually means "have faith/trust in my way." It is not the person of Jesus who saves, but rather his spiritual virtues and ethical character traits. Many have gotten this wrong, choosing an easier "Christianity" rather than the disciplined path of Jesus.

When we live by his same values and virtues, we too are saved from a life in which we are complicit with injustice, sinfulness, greed, and the love of power. The power of Jesus lies not in his suffering on the cross, but in his flourishing with compassion in all of his relationships.

It was his forgiveness and compassion, even for his persecutors, that revealed the way of spiritual salvation; not some cosmic decision by God to make Jesus endure torture and torment as some sort of sadistic and accountability-denying expiation for other people's evils. We all have to take responsibility for ourselves, according to Jesus. We must follow him, not merely offer lip-service to him.

How did we allow ourselves to think that being a Christian, a follower of Christ, was an easy thing? Something we could live as we choose within our own culture, and simply believe the right things without actually living the right kind of life? This is not Jesus' view. It is the opposite of his view. If we are to "spiritually" live, then we must do so by the values we are willing to profess not just with our lips but by our actions.

We call it "Holy Week," and often think about what Jesus "did for us" long ago. But perhaps we should rename it "Scary Week," for it is when we must confront whether we are willing to go to our own proverbial Calvary with him – not to see what he will do for us, but to do what we can for others by showing them, as he did, that it is how you live, not what you believe, that makes the difference.

We may complain when our government gives handouts to the least fortunate with our tax dollars. But Jesus calls us to give "all" that we have for the sake of the poor and oppressed. "Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor," he tells us. But more than this, more than giving away all of our possessions, economic comfort, and financial security, he asks us to give our very lives.

We don't want to believe that he was serious about this. We deny that he was political at all, much less that he asked of us to perform the most political act of all – to lay down our lives for others...to love them as we would want to be loved.

Who amongst us if we were oppressed terribly would not feel the greatest of awe and gratitude for one who would come to our defense, even laying down his/her own life for the cause of our liberation?...who would stand up to despots, warhawks, bullies, and greedy oligarchs who benefitted at the expense of the least of these?

It is easier to think it is being faithful to Jesus and his way to simply play nice and pray for the welfare of those suffering. But Jesus asks us to do much more. He asks us to lay down our own lives, if necessary, to create justice in this world.

This is what true love is – to lay down our lives for our friends, the poor, the oppressed, and the afflicted. It is to put ourselves in harm's way of the powers that be: either overturning systemic laws of injustice, or dying in trying to do so. There is no other option to be a faithful Christian. We either serve God's ways, or mammon's ways. We can't have it both ways; as much as we try to convince ourselves that we can.

This is what "American Christianity" tries to deny – which is why it is nothing like the way of Jesus. We'd rather believe in a "prosperity gospel" than a Gospel that tells us we may need to give up our bodies to save our souls. We have become too comfortable and apolitical. We've forgotten Jesus – as he really was.
— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 3/16-17/2016