

HOLY MONDAY: MARRIAGE AND TAXES

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Towson Presbyterian Church
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Philippians 3:17 – 4:1
Luke 19:47-48, 20:27-40

Our Lenten sermon series is exploring, day by day, the last week of Jesus' life. Each Sunday during Lent we are focusing on one day of that final week. Last Sunday we observed Palm Sunday, the day Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey to the cries of "Hosanna"—God, save us!—from the crowd. Those cheering people saw in Jesus the long-awaited "Son of David," the Messianic King who they expected would save Israel from its occupation as a conquered province of the Roman Empire. Of course, we know that Jesus was not the kind of King the people were expecting. We know that the cheering crowds of Sunday are going to reject him by the end of the week. He's going to be crucified on Friday. So, we keep asking ourselves during this Lenten series, what kind of King is Jesus? Over what sort of kingdom does he reign? What does he expect of his subjects, of those of us who have chosen to be his subjects?

Today, we move on to the Monday of Holy Week, Holy Monday. I'm following the Gospel of Luke's account of what Jesus did that day, which includes the lesson I read a moment ago and continues for two chapters, right to the end of Chapter 21. We don't have time to read all of it in worship this morning, but I encourage you to do so later at home. Many of you are reading our Lenten book-in-common, *The Last Week* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan.¹ You will notice parallels between Luke's account and the one in Mark's gospel, which is the gospel Borg and Crossan focus on. You may also notice that Luke and Mark—and Matthew and John, for that matter—do not always agree on the sequence of events during Jesus' final week. For example, Mark says Jesus drove the money changers from the temple on Monday, while Luke and Matthew say that happened on Sunday. Don't let these sort of discrepancies worry you; the gospels were not written down until forty years or more after Jesus died and different people remembered the detail of that last week differently. The gospel accounts are not like modern newspaper stories.

What is consistent among these gospel accounts is that over these several days at the beginning of Holy Week—Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday—Jesus is back and forth from the temple, where he spends a great deal of time teaching and interacting with the crowds of pilgrims who have come to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. "All the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple," Luke says.² At night, Jesus retreats from the temple precinct to be with his friends in Bethany, on the ridge of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kidron Valley. But during the daytime, he is in the temple, teaching. The people are "spellbound" by what they hear, Luke says.

¹ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem* (New York: HarperOne, 2006).

² Luke 21:38.

Already on Sunday Jesus has earned the enmity of the temple establishment by entering Jerusalem as he had and by his actions at the temple, overturning the tables of the money changers and dove sellers. Borg and Crossan make the case that in doing these things, Jesus is deliberately challenging the existing system of Roman imperial rule and Jewish high-priestly collaboration with it.³ He is protesting a system of domination and exploitation legitimated by religious authorities in the name of God, but which is radically different from the kingdom of God he has preached and inaugurated, Jesus is a direct threat to the high priests and other leaders of the temple who have a vested interest in the Roman status quo. So these religious leaders have decided they need to get rid of Jesus, to have him killed. But they know they can't be too heavy handed, because the crowd is behind Jesus. Luke says of Holy Monday, "The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound."⁴

So what we have on Monday of Holy Week is series of incidents in the temple where various parts of the religious establishment ask Jesus what are in effect trick questions. They're hoping his answers will either implicate him as a rebel against the Roman authorities or discredit him with the Jewish people. So, the religious leaders question his authority. They ask about paying taxes to Caesar. Jesus parries their verbal assaults cleverly and the crowd loves it.

The third of these challenges is the one I'd like to focus on briefly. Some Sadducees—members of one party of the religious establishment—approach Jesus. "By this time, everyone in Judah knows who Jesus is: miracle worker, famous healer, wise man, the one who raised the girl from the dead, the one who threw out the money changers, the one who came into the city with the people shouting and waving. Some say he's the next Moses, some say Elijah, some say he's the Messiah. [We know, of course, that Jesus' time is drawing to an end. The time with him is very short and very precious.]

"So here are these Sadducees, learned men who are members of the branch of Judaism that does not believe in a resurrection after death. These Sadducees finally get to encounter Jesus. This is their moment—this is their time in the sun. Yet, this is what they say: Teacher, if seven brothers die in succession and each marries the same woman, one after another, to whom is she married in heaven?

"[Do you see the irony of this situation? Here they are before the Christ—[God's] Anointed One—and...the best [these learned, powerful men can do is this dumb question.]

"There is a Jewish saying that says, 'Rake the muck this way; rake the muck that way. It's still muck. Meanwhile we could be stringing pearls for heaven.' [We get caught up in the wrong things. We fuss and fight over matters that in God's great scheme of things are trivial. [We] waste our time raking the muck instead of stringing pearls for heaven[. We] waste our time playing word games instead of seeing the Christ right in front of us[. We avoid questions that matter.]

³ Borg and Crossan, *The Last Week*, 52-53.

⁴ Luke 19:47-48.

“Karl Barth, the great 20th Century theologian, once said: ‘The Bible gives to every [person] and to every era answers to their questions as they deserve. We shall always find in it as much as we seek and no more.’⁵ Do we use our questions to keep Jesus at arms’ length? Do we only seek to play Trivial Pursuit? Are we afraid of encountering the living Christ because we really don’t want him in our lives?

“It’s clear in the gospels that Jesus has no time for those who merely want to play games. [Especially during this last week, I think,] he has no patience with those who merely want to trick him or to use him to prove how smart or righteous or perfect they are. Usually those who waste his time don’t come off very well—indeed, after this exchange, Luke writes, ‘They no longer dared to ask him another question.’

“However, Jesus always has time for questions that are real. He always has time for those who are stringing pearls for heaven. Because the questions deep in our hearts are what lead us to be in relation to him. Jesus always has time for questions like this:

- Can you heal my child?
- I have a demon that torments me and I can find no rest. Can you help me?
- I have lost my way to the circle of life. Can you bring me back?
- No one will come near me—because they say I am unclean. Do you love someone like me?

“When people offer these questions to Jesus, the answer he gives is not a slogan or a sound bite. The answer he gives is himself. When the Sadducees or the Pharisees ask Jesus their trick questions, they usually get parables: stories that will puzzle their minds and invite them to look at the world in a new way. But when women and men bring Jesus their deepest yearnings, he doesn’t talk to them; he engages them. When genuine people come to him with genuine questions, he often doesn’t say anything, but he touches, he encounters, he relates. He invites people to journey with him on the Way.

“The Latin root of the word ‘question’ means ‘to seek.’ It’s where we get the word ‘quest.’ To ask a real question is to enter on a journey; it’s to begin traveling on The Way. Jesus gets exasperated with the Sadducees simply because they aren’t willing to leave the station. They just want to play games and stay right where they are. They aren’t right or wrong; they are just wasting their life. They are just raking the muck.

“Remember Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*? An aspiring poet from America wrote the famous poet Rilke in Germany with questions about his art. In one of his replies, Rilke writes, ‘Love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language....Live the questions now. Perhaps then someday far in the future, you will gradually...live your way into the answer.’⁶

⁵ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Douglas Horton, ed. and tran. (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1928), 32.

⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002 [1945]), 21.

“Our deepest questions don’t have simple answers. Instead they are doors to walk through. Jesus says, ‘I am the Way’ because with him and through him we live our way into answers.”⁷

That’s true for us as individuals and also for us as a community of faith. A congregation needs to keep asking deep questions of its identity and purpose as God’s people. To keep doing the same things the same way year after year in a world that is constantly changing is to stagnate. And it’s far too easy in any church for the hard work of institutional maintenance while reacting to the crises of the day to devolve into raking the muck. That’s why our Session has decided to undertake a major strategic planning exercise in the months ahead. We’ve begun this weekend with the assistance of Dan Hotchkiss, a senior consultant with the Alban Institute. Both of our boards and a number of other leaders in the church have had an opportunity to meet Dan and begin the process of living gradually into our questions. I know we have some exciting days ahead of us.

“So let us take heart. Today is the day Jesus has come to the city; today is the day Jesus has come to our city. The time is short, but it is our time. Time to bring our deepest questions to Him—the questions for which we want a new answer, like:

- Does God love me?
- Who are we as Towson Presbyterian Church?
- What is God calling us to do and be?
- Who is our neighbor?

“The Sadducees cannot ask these questions because they think they already know the answers. Real questions are doorways to the journey to newness. We ask Jesus these questions because he is who he is. Jesus is the door to newness; he is the Way to new life. He invites us to think of a new world: a world where the old rules do not apply. He invites the Sadducees to lay aside their stupid questions and think of a new world in which the living and the dead are connected.

“So now is the time. Do not think about what we can do but about what God can do. Remember what he said? Ask and you will receive. How can we receive if we never ask?

“Let us pray.

“Gracious God, increase our faith so that we might bring our deepest desires and our most ardent questions to you. Help us to trust in your never failing mercy so that you might draw us deeper and deeper into relation to you. In all that we do, and in all that we are, help us to remember that we are your people. We ask this in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.”⁸

⁷ Porter Taylor, “Love the Questions,” Sermon broadcast on Day1 Radio, November 7, 2004.

⁸ Taylor, “Love the Questions.”