

“Peace from the Margins”

Lent 6C-19 (Palm Sunday)

Luke 19: 28-42

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Rev. Rob Carter

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For three years, they’d heard the rumors. For three years, the people of Jerusalem had heard reports about this Prophet from Nazareth who made the blind see and the lame walk... who cured the sick wherever he went and fed thousands with just a few loaves and fish.

And for three years they’d heard about the crowd following him... this crowd that kept growing wherever he went. For three years, they heard about these folks who encountered Jesus and decided that they, too, would leave the life they knew in order to pursue the life he was revealing.

But according to their reports, many of the folks who began to follow Jesus weren’t from the center of society. No... most in the crowd following Jesus didn’t hail from places like Jerusalem, where the powerful and the privileged were located. No... most of those following Jesus had come from the “margins,” having been alienated from the power and privilege located amid the center of society.¹

But if stop and think about it, this makes sense, doesn’t it? Jesus was a prophet from the margins. He was conceived by an unwed mother. He was born in a barn before his family became refugees, fleeing an evil political reality. When they were finally able to return, it was to Nazareth... a town along the margins.

So naturally, Jesus—a prophet *from* the margins—spent much of his time within the margins. It was there he often found people open to the new way of life he’d come to reveal. After all, power and privilege were already nonexistent along the margins.

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So let’s be clear. *These* were the people filling the crowd that followed Jesus and his disciples into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. Prostitutes... tax collectors... lepers... those who’d been possessed... plus all sorts of others who’d been pushed away from the center of society. *These* were the people Jesus took with him as he made that ridiculous ride on that ridiculous donkey into the city that literally sat at “the center of (Israel): home (to) the temple, the capital city, the point of cultural identity.”²

So on Palm Sunday, we remember and celebrate how the prophet from the margins led people from the margins into the center of it all. Jerusalem—the home of Israel’s political and religious power and privilege.

But lo and behold, part of the joy of this day is that the people of Jerusalem didn’t care. They didn’t care Jesus was riding a pathetic little donkey... bearing no weapons... carrying no

¹ Rebecca Chopp, “When the Center Cannot Contain the Margins,” in *The Education of the Practical Theologian*, ed. Don Browning and David Polk (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) as described by Insook Lee, “Pastoral Perspective on Luke 19: 29-40) in *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 2*, ed. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

² Insook Lee, “Pastoral Perspective on Luke 19: 29-40) in *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 2*, ed. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 176.

signs of wealth as other great leaders had always done. Nor did the people of Jerusalem seem the least bit concerned by the folks following him—the riffraff Jesus had collected along the way.

Rather, as all four gospels tell it, the people of Jerusalem—the people in the center of it all—were ecstatic to welcome him. They greeted him like a king, spreading their coats along the road so Jesus wouldn't get dirty from all the dust.

“Peace!” they shouted. “Peace! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

In Matthew, Mark, and John, the crowds shout “Hosanna!” which meant “Save us!” “Save us, King Jesus! Hosanna!”

But according to Luke, the people of Jerusalem lining the road that day didn't just shout “Save us.” No, they shouted specifically for peace!

They had heard what Jesus had done... and they sensed what he was coming to Jerusalem to do. They believed he was the Messiah sent from God to finally free Israel from its Roman oppressors and bring their nation peace once more.

Peace from the tyranny of Roman military might.

Peace from the oppression of Roman taxation over land that had once been their own.

Peace from subjugation to Roman laws that often contradicted their Hebrew law.

And at last, at long last Jesus had finally arrived at the very center of their society to establish the peace they so desperately desired.

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But as Luke says following the end of our reading this morning... when Jesus neared the city gates and took in all that was happening, he began to weep. He heard “the crowds chanting for peace,” and his emotions spilled over. Through a haze of tears he looked at all the people from the margins... and then all the people who'd spent their lives amid the center of power and privilege chanting for peace... and he cried to himself, “If you only recognized the things that make for peace!” “If you only recognized the things that make for peace!”

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Next thing we know, Jesus is off the donkey, making a b-line for the temple, determined to prepare the way for peace.

When he got there and saw how the religious leaders had turned the temple into a place of trade and profit, he blew up. He threw their tables over. He kicked out the schemers and the money changers. He accused the religious leaders of becoming a bunch of robbers!

And he did it in order to show them that peace isn't found in turning a profit.

The next morning, Jesus returned to the temple to confront the religious heavyweights. He told them this really offensive parable comparing them to evil people who were only interested in serving their own needs and desires.

And he did it—in front of everyone—in order to show them that peace can never be found in looking out for your own interests before serving the needs of others—whoever the other may be.

A little while later, a different group of religious leaders approached Jesus asking a series of questions... one having to do with taxes... another having to do with resurrection. And with each of his answers, Jesus courageously challenged deeply, deeply held assumptions of his day.

Why? He was showing them that peace can never be found in building divisions between people or heaping some historical morality code upon folks you disagree with. Rather, peace, he insisted, is found in tearing down what separates people from each other.

And then... then Jesus happened to lay eyes on this poor widow putting her last two pennies into the offering plate. Seeing her gift compared to the huge donations of the wealthy, Jesus explained, "This poor widow has made a bigger gift than everybody else combined."

And he said it—he offended the wealthy and powerful of the society—in order to show them that the way of peace will never be made simply by giving what's left over. Rather, peace can only be forged along the path of genuine sacrifice and overwhelming generosity.

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So there we have it. At the beginning of the week, the people of Jerusalem—the people at the center of Israel's religious and political life—they hailed Jesus as a Messiah sent from God to bring them peace.

And throughout the next five days, Jesus proved them right! Jesus did everything he could to show them all the things that make for peace... for them... for you... for us... for all.

But after the people saw and heard all that Jesus had to share...
 that peace requires generosity and sacrifice...
 that peace means welcoming people you'd prefer to be separated from ...
 that peace never has been and never will be found in financial prosperity...
 the people crying out for peace on Sunday no longer wanted any parts of peace come
 Friday.

While the people of Jerusalem were tired of living under Rome's thumb, that didn't mean they were willing to give up the power and privilege they'd grown accustomed to as they sat in the center of it all—so far from the margins of society. I mean, the people of Jerusalem may not have been free from Rome, but at least they had the power and privilege that came from living amid a city with a bustling economy... with a town center and resources that folks along the margins could only dream about. At least the people of Jerusalem were blessed with the great temple every other Hebrew had to travel to. At least the people of Jerusalem knew the Sadducees and Pharisees and Zealots who were able to lobby the Empire on their behalf.

So while they said they wanted peace, they weren't so sure they were willing to give up what religious and political power and privilege they had... even if that's what the peace of God's kingdom requires.

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And as Palm Sunday posits every single year to you and me and Christians living in suburban America, neither, friends, are we.

Let's face it. Who here is willing to pay twice as much for your clothing and produce and electronics to make sure the people who made it or harvested it make a living wage?

Who here is willing to eliminate all fossil fuel consuming products in your home, and give up beef... based upon the global violence fossil fuel emissions and methane gas wreak on creation?

Who here is willing to speak up to a government that continues to take increasingly painful swipes against people literally running from the violence of drug cartels and poverty like none of us can fathom—many of them simply fleeing a land of violence in the hope their children might experience the blessings of this great nation we so often take for granted?

I mean... and please know I say this looking in a mirror as well as looking at our society... We complain that society is too violent, but we allow our children to play video games that glorify gun violence and give our money to Hollywood production studios that do the same.

We complain about the growing inequality throughout our land, but then hoard what we've got instead of giving more to those hurting the most.

We complain that the world isn't fair, that someone should do something, but then fall silent when the call for help goes out.

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You see, friends, we sit precisely where the people of Jerusalem sat. In the center. We cannot help but to look at the world from perspectives other than that of power and privilege.

Now... as I share that... please understand I'm not saying life's been easy for you. Many of you, I know, have faced incredible challenges... sometimes overwhelming, brutal obstacles you've had to overcome in life. I know you've worked incredibly hard—tirelessly—to get to where you are today. So again, I'm not saying life's been easy, or implying you haven't earned all that you have.

Nor am I saying that some people's state of need isn't entirely self-inflicted.

But as a congregation of mostly middle class Americans, we can't pretend we don't sit at the center. We can't pretend we don't live far from the margins where people lack the power or privilege of going to high school without the fear of gang violence... or to simply be able to go to high school instead of working to help support your impoverished family. I mean, we sit at the center of a nation that sits at the center of the world when it comes to power and privilege.

Heck, from a personal perspective, as a white, middle class straight guy, I practically am the center.

But Palm Sunday arrives each and every year, friends, to remind us that Jesus doesn't come to us from the center. Never has... never will. No. The peace of Jesus Christ will never be established from the center out... but from the outside in.

This is why Jesus comes to us just as he came to Jerusalem... from the margins... bringing with him people who are hungry... poor... despised... scared... betrayed... homeless...

You name it—if they're from the margins, Jesus brings them with him, proclaiming that if we *really* want to pursue the things that make for peace... if we *really* want to pursue the things that make for peace, it begins with recognizing the power and privilege we have over

those living along the margins... and then doing something about it. It means giving up some of our power and privilege so that those with none might finally have some.

But that, ultimately, is the obstacle to peace, isn't it? How often do the powerful and privileged ever truly give up their power and privilege so that those with none might finally have some?

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On that first Palm Sunday, amid the parade, the people at the center said they were clamoring for peace. "Peace" they shouted at Jesus. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace!"

But by Friday, they wanted nothing to do with it if peace meant giving up some of their power and privilege. And to make sure they wouldn't have to, they put the peacemaker on a cross.

What about us? Do we want peace? Do we want peace enough to let go of some of our power and privilege so those with none might finally have some?