

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Passion/Palm Sunday, March 28, 2010
Lessons: Isaiah 50:1-10 and Luke 19:35-42

APPEALING TO WHAT IN PEOPLE?

We are living in a season of anger that is already exceeding danger levels. Decades ago, we spoke of anger as though it were a liquid that could be “bottled up” inside us. We thought we needed to express our anger to “get it out” of our systems so it would not blow up, boil over inside us, or poison our temperaments. Since those days, we have learned that the more people practice anger, the angrier they become. We can actually train ourselves to become easily enraged, which, of course, can have quite detrimental effects upon our blood pressure, our work, our sleep, and our personal relationships as well.

Angry people do not think straight, as one man recently confessed to, he says, his shame and fear. He is the younger man in the now infamous video of two men in Columbus, Ohio bullying an older man with Parkinson’s disease, and he now admits he was completely out of control and says he will never go to a political rally again. For him, that decision might be wise, but neither politics nor religion necessarily fuels rage. Playing to anger, stirring it up in crowds, is a choice by politicians or religious leaders that deliberately targets enemies and keeps demonizing them so that the enraged followers no longer feel the need to treat those others so demonized as fellow human beings.

The question I raise for us on this Passion Sunday, more popularly and comfortably called Palm Sunday, is, *To what emotions and sensibilities in people do we appeal by our representations of Jesus Christ and his gospel of hope and salvation?* What attitudes do we foster? What is the nature of our relatedness, inwardly among people in our church family, and outwardly to our communities, our society, and our world?

The people in that first Palm Sunday crowd wanted a Messiah who would at least deliver them from domination by the Romans and perhaps even elevate Jerusalem to replace Rome as earth’s ruling city. No wonder Jesus gets emotional at the sight of Jerusalem laid out before him: the things that make for peace are hidden from its people’s eyes. He is not the Messiah they want. Jesus is God’s Messiah who deliberately takes the form of the Servant. The people want a warrior king who will crush their enemies and give to his own the power and privilege of the favored. He has a very different understanding of peace. Though he is cheered on Sunday, Jesus knows he is bound to be rejected as he reveals his true nature and purpose to the people and challenges their political and spiritual leaders.

People, then or now, who want to conquer and rule in the name of the Christ do not care for Jesus as he truly came in the form of the Servant. Whenever the churches wish to demonize their enemies, drive out those who differ, or demand power and privilege in the society, they must hide the real Jesus from sight, because he will not serve such purposes. They must fabricate a different Christ, then call him Jesus.

Yes, we are living in a time of anger when the method of operation is to distort the opponent and then attack the distortion with as much fury as possible. Our air waves are polluted with hyped up rage, with racism and other forms of bigotry, and with contagious fear of “them” — the demonized groups who supposedly threaten our way of life. In such a climate, neighbors, friends, and family members can become enemies, and some people become angry in general because anger has become their dominant emotion and most ready response to life’s situations. And it starts young. Our schools are explosive with it. So, if we find ourselves always or very often angry, that condition may be our point of greatest need for spiritual healing. I’m not suggesting that people who love God never get angry about anything, but the practice of anger and the habit of it are not of God. Besides, God’s anger is always born of love for the people and compassion for the oppressed. It is an anger that seeks to lift up and restore people’s broken or denied humanity, not a rage that dehumanizes people in order to break them or dismiss them without conscience.

Paul writes to the Galatians that the Spirit of God does not generate enmity and strife. Rather, the responses to life and people inspired within us and among us by God’s Spirit are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” May God’s Spirit teach us to call forth such responses as these from ourselves and others.

The Servant of the LORD is able to be a teacher because he is “one who is taught” by God. As Christ’s church together, we are called to be people taught by God. Are we afraid in these times? Certainly, there are substantial reasons for fear these days, but in the way of Jesus, we learn to meet our own fears with trust in God and concern for each other, and we do not exploit the fears of others to turn them into an angry mob. Let us remember, that God loves also the people we fear, which does not mean God is necessarily pleased with their behavior (or ours, for that matter), but it does mean we have no authorization from Jesus Christ to dehumanize them so we can attack them or hate them with a self-satisfied conscience.

The Servant accepts shaming from his opponents who spit into his face and tear out bits of his beard. The Servant does not believe he deserves to be put to shame, but he stands his ground without retaliation because he trusts God to bring the outcome God wants. So, after the account of the Servant’s humiliation, the question is put to the people, “Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no

light, yet trusts in the name of the LORD and relies upon his God?” That’s a tall order! It’s hard to walk in the darkness. It’s hard to sit with a frightened, sick, or grief-stricken friend and have no answers to give that offer any real help. It’s painful to let ourselves care about people being shunted aside in this recession, blocked from getting started in their careers, or “put out to pasture,” as some say. It’s easier to self-protect by looking at the bigger picture and saying, “Well, it’s too bad, but it’s happening all over, and there’s nothing to be done but hope they bounce back.” We have a natural aversion to confronting problems we cannot solve, especially when they are other people’s problems. But we are called to follow the Servant who was willing to walk into the darkness, having no light but trusting God. And the Servant does not go into the darkness for himself or because of anything he has done to bring the darkness upon himself. He goes forward without light for the sake of the people.

None of this reflection is meant to say that Christ’s followers or his church should always be passive in the face of injustices and evils done to people. It is to say, rather, that Jesus does not give us the option of achieving any greater good by the means of arousing or exploiting fear, suspicion, hatred, or bigotry. Neither may we attain our own peace of mind by writing off others who are “them” to us as less than human or as unloved by God.

For us and our sake, for the sake of a callously blind city, for the sake of a bitterly divided world, Jesus rode that donkey into Jerusalem, openly declaring himself the one sent by God, as the first step on his journey into the heart of darkness. There is no place in life or death God will not go with us and for us. I find it hard to imagine Jesus happy as he rode into Jerusalem that day, because he was throwing down the gauntlet to the authorities, and he knew it. He was not going to be made a king, and he never wanted to be a king, anyway. He had come to give himself for the people. There really was no other way it could end. God and humanity were not going to come together except in his broken body. He threatened the systems of virtue, religion, and power. His was the way of redemptive love, and though everybody needed it, nobody wanted that.

On Thursday evening, in our service of Communion, we will recall Jesus’ self-sacrifice for God and us. It is only by way of the cross that Easter has anything to offer us and our troubled world. The straight highway from Hosanna to Hallelujah bypassing Jesus’ humiliation and death is a delusion. Only through his brokenness are we healed and made whole. Only because he went all the way into the darkness do we have hope for life in the light in this world or the next. Amen.