

Lessons To Be Learned

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“He stirs up the people by teaching. . . .” -- Luke 23:5

This morning's Passion reading is an excerpt from Luke's account of Jesus's last week on earth, at least as we commonly think of being on earth. We began the service with a symbolic re-enactment of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem, our version of that bit of street theater staged by Jesus and his disciples for the benefit of the onlookers who had flocked to Jerusalem for Passover, and some of whom undoubtedly were Jesus's enemies. The more frequently and carefully I read the evangelists' accounts of Jesus's last days, the more sophisticated and complicated Jesus's actions and the authorities' responses seem to me.

And the more realistic, because human life is not the stuff of simplistic fairy tales. It is, rather, messy, unclear, and unfinished. Unlike fairy tales, in which someone overcomes great obstacles to live happily ever after, the story of the end of Jesus's public ministry ends on no such cheery note. The story of the Passion is a tale of darkness at noon, a reminder from the writers of the Bible that human actions have consequences that reach beyond history. Nature has always been the overlooked player in the three-act drama of creation – fall – redemption, and our oblivion to what in German could be called our *Totentanz* – our death-dance – with creation is one of those lessons Jesus taught that we have yet to learn.

And it appears from Luke's Passion narrative that Jesus's teaching was one of the things that brought him into the cross-hairs of those in power.

“He stirs up the people by teaching,” is the way his accusers put it, and the accusation was true. Jesus **was** stirring up the people by teaching a way of life dramatically out of step with the death-dance of the Jewish leaders with their Roman overlords. That was the death-dance of power politics. On the Roman side, it was the *pax Romana* of occupation, exploitation, and suppression. On the Jewish side, it was the dance of submission, cooperation, and collusion. Jesus's way was subversion -- “perverting our nation” in the language of the assembly – by teaching a way that neither dominated nor submitted to domination. He called it the realm of God or the realm of heaven.

It was and was not a place. It was a place where a mustard seed of difference was planted and could take root and grow, and where two or three gathered in their teacher's name could start a new kind of family and a new kind of world.

The realm of heaven, which Jesus was anointed by God to inaugurate on earth in the subversive, perverting way of non-violent, self-sacrificial love, was not Caesar's realm or the realm of Herod, the Jewish puppet-king before whom Jesus was tried a second time. It was not the realm of Christendom and it is not the realm of our own self-styled Christian nation. The realm of heaven is not the Catholic Church – even with its new pope – and it is not the sectarian splinters of Protestantism.

Over and against all of these institutions seeking to be served by more power and

more members and more money stands the realm of God, with God's Anointed One at its head, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. It was John the Baptizer who first called Jesus that, and to this day nobody knows exactly what he meant . . . except that he recognized in Jesus something that was not in the crowds flocking to John for baptism, or in the scribes and Pharisees who tried to keep the peace by going along to get along, or in the Romans who regarded brutality as business as usual. You can imagine that if someone told that crowd to "Turn the other cheek," she or he might be considered perverse and subverting, and so he was.

And so such perverse and subversive teachings stirred up the people by holding out to them the hope of a better way. Jesus stirred up the people by teaching about good Samaritans and forgiving fathers and foolish homeowners. He passed on the lessons he learned from the birds of the air and the lilies of the field and the rain that falls on the righteous and the unrighteous alike. All of these taught him something about God's ways with us and with all creation, and Jesus felt called by God and anointed by God's Holy Spirit to teach those ways to all who could receive his teachings.

And of course, as we know, many could not. "His own people did not accept him" John tells us just a few verses into his account of Jesus's life. Jesus stirred up the people not just with hope, but also with indignation and resentment and misunderstanding. Those Jewish and Roman authorities who so wanted Jesus out of the way had their followers, too, and if history is any indicator, Jesus's lessons and Jesus's way still meet stiff resistance among ordinary people like us. We are as guilty as our ancestors of resisting the deep demands of the gospel, and that's why, when we and millions of our sisters and brothers around the world read the Passion on this Sunday, all of us together say the damning words of the crowd, "Crucify, crucify him!"

If we did not have the luxury of two thousand years of taming and domesticating and eviscerating Jesus's call to a radical way of life, he would be as threatening to us as he was to our ancestors, and we would be no less eager than they to be rid of him.

Where would that vast military-industrial complex be – about which Republican President Eisenhower warned us – if we did not dismiss Jesus's teachings about peace? Where would our financial sector be if we did not ignore Jesus's teachings about wealth? Where would the housing industry or the insurance industry or agribusiness or energy companies be if we did not blithely disregard Jesus's teachings about possessions?

A few years back we trembled with fear that our economy was on the brink of collapse, and the gloomiest economists still warn of that day. We are desperate to preserve our way of life, oblivious to the many ways in which it contradicts Jesus's teachings about justice, righteousness, and peace.

And so we will continue our robotic wars and our shredding of the safety net for the vulnerable and our reduction of the obligations of the rich and powerful to the society that created the conditions for their wealth and power in the first place. We will cling to our guns and our religion and we will have Jesus on our terms or we will not have him at all.

And seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, the crucified and risen Jesus Christ will weep for us as he once wept for Jerusalem, and for the same reason: because we are a people stirred up by the lessons we have yet to learn.