

“To Go on Ahead” – Palm Sunday 2016

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Good morning! I want to take this brief moment to thank all of you for your ongoing support while I’ve worked on my doctoral project at Seattle University. It’s because of your support and input that I was able to go on ahead with the work. Thank you. All of you.

This morning we find ourselves at a critical juncture. We stand outside of Jerusalem, gazing toward it from the East – from the steep hillside of the Mount of Olives, which descends into the Kidron Valley, and then ascends back up again into the Holy City. A short time ago, a little farther East, while they were still in Bethany, Jesus had just told some of the disciples to go on ahead to procure the colt for him to ride. They did. They went on ahead. They went on ahead because they believed in him; they went on ahead because they had faith in his work; they went on ahead because they trusted him.

If the hymn we just sang was a Psalm written in the first century, I could imagine those disciples humming the tune to themselves, the words filling their thoughts, and compelling them forward as they went on ahead: “O Savior, let me walk with you, in earthly paths of service true...” And then that verse: “Teach me your patience; let me be in closer dearer company, in work that keeps faith sweet and strong, in trust that triumphs over wrong...”

When I was a fire fighter in Amherst, Massachusetts, I remember arriving at buildings with smoke showing. Our gear donned, our air tanks and breathing masks on, one of us had to be the first to enter the smoke-filled building. One of us had to go on ahead of the others – to trust that they would do their jobs, just as he or she was trusted to lead the way.

Willingness to go on ahead, to move out of your comfort zone – out of the established norm – takes courage; sometimes – depending on the circumstance – it takes “trust that triumphs over wrong.”

Why is this important? As I said, we are at a critical juncture – a juncture where our Holy Days and the motivations for their unfolding *parallel* **but** then begin to *collide* together with great and undeniable force with the unfolding political tragedy of our national discourse during this primary season. We’re at a critical juncture as we begin Holy Week today, *and* as we watch the current rhetoric unfold on both sides with sometimes despondent and sometimes indignant unease.

Maybe you’ve seen the picture of the sign held overhead at a political rally. The one that says: “What do we want?! Respectful discourse! When do we want it?! Now would be agreeable to me, but I am also interested in your opinion!”

We want respectful discourse.

We crave compassionate communication.

Liberation Theologian, Gustavo Guitierrez writes, “Fear is a bad advisor.” Though, I *do* think there are times when fear and oppression have led nations to help marginalized populations out of oppressive circumstances in our world.

Fear creeps in in incessant and insistent ways from all directions these days: from bully pulpits, from media, from hearing too much anger, from hearing too little compassion, and from not being heard at all. Dr. Martin Luther King once said that “Riots are the language of the unheard.” As I’ve watched the debate primaries, I’ve also come to the conclusion that when fear is introduced into an already unstable system and then manipulated, it can be twisted into anger – righteous indignation. In our current climate this seems to be especially the case when privilege

and entitlement coalesce and provide motivation and space to vent that anger, for fear of losing that very privilege and entitlement.

How do we move out ahead of the present discourse and build each other up – instead of tearing each other down?

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The disciples undoubtedly know that as they ascend toward the city, with Jesus riding on his colt, and crowds celebrating his arrival, there is another processional entering from the West. A Roman legion is arriving with all pomp and circumstance.

The disciples must know that as they enter from the opposite side of the city, with opposing aims, and opposing faith - that political and religious opposition mean one thing: they mean death. The Romans have already crucified close to two thousand dissenters.

Fear is a powerful thing. How is it we can find the strength to go on ahead, to move beyond the present circumstance and walk with Jesus into the city? How can we take those first few steps alongside the one who rides the colt, who comes from humble beginnings, and makes this triumphant^y subversive entry? How do we take those precious steps forward, like Mary who will arrive in the predawn darkness one week from now and let our feet pad down into a rock hewn tomb, only to discover that death will not have the final word? Like the choir's visit to Echo Glen school and security facility, how do we take those courageous steps into an unfamiliar place in order to bring words and songs of peace? How do we respond when we hear Tim's father calling from the baptismal waters, "Come out deeper"?

How do we, like the disciples, find the faith and the trust to go on ahead – to follow Jesus into the city, and to celebrate what this entry means as it diverges from the establishment – when it's a stark contrast to a very different looking entry on the other side of the city...? We ask

because we see parallels when our own political *parties* lose sight of the humanity of the people they represent, and when some of these authorities use our own sacred text to solemnify their motivation and their posture.

From the very outset of the Christian Scriptures, we find the Jesus movement is a response to both the religious *and* the political; because the religious and the political have been soldered together – forged into divine imperial armor for the God-head of the state.

Archaeologists uncovered a stone tablet with a birth announcement with an inscription declaring the “Son of God” was born, who would be the “lord” and “savior,” and would bring “peace on earth.” It was not a tablet inscribed for Jesus, but a tablet created for Caesar Augustus. So, we can see from the very start, our own story of Jesus’ birth at Christmas marks a time when the authors of the Gospels let us know the religious world *and* the political world are crashing together in dangerous ways.

Was the god among us the emperor, or was the God among us a child born to a young woman and a carpenter on the outskirts of the empire? Was God represented by political might, by imperial fortitude, by power and domination? Or was God represented in peacemaking, justice work, and the call for an equal distribution of resources?

Was God’s word overbearing or was it compassionate?

Turn on the TV and see if we’re still asking these questions today. Login to Facebook and see if we’re still living these tensions right now.

I believe the only way we can call this entry “triumphal” is to get out ahead of the polarization; to recognize and name our fear, yes, and then to do as the disciples did and to have faith and courage knowing we do the right thing when we act in compassion, we do the right

thing when we speak with compassion, we do the right thing when – with compassion – we uphold the welcoming community that holds the palm branches over head.

Jesus asks the disciples to do two things when they go on ahead. First, he asks them to get him the colt, which the prophets tell us will be one of the tools he uses to humble himself and bring peace to the nations. Second, when the disciples ask what they should say when asked why they need the colt, he tells them to answer that they do it for him – they collect it on his behalf.

There's beauty in the metaphor: to go on ahead to prepare the means for peacemaking and to remember it's done on Jesus' behalf. We recognize this as a greater call to discipleship, and it gives direction for how we go about interacting with the world. Just like Megan's grandparents, as Baptists who uphold both freedom and responsibility, we are called to find ways to live out our beliefs in this world around us.

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People have asked me what I learned when I came to the completion of my project at Seattle U. I contextualize it this way: we live in a fractured world. It is a world breaking open. We watch the reality of this fracturing happen online, in the media, and around our dinner tables. Unfortunately, neither our political nor our religious affiliations are safe from the problems we face, and in fact, these are often invoked as a means to justify or make worse the fracturing.

We've forgotten how to talk to each other.

What's interesting is that, despite this current reality *out there*, this community is made up of a vast spectrum of political and theological beliefs. Every time we gather we learn that though we are many, we are only ever better together – that this great diversity makes us richer. Now, we're not perfect; we're not always the picture of perfection when it comes to including

every voice, but we are trying, and by trying, we are learning. This diversity of thoughts and opinions provides us with a greater understanding of God in our midst.

It couldn't happen if you weren't willing to engage with each other by communicating in compassionate ways. Could it? It is only a microcosm of what could be, and yet hope always begins with the slightest flicker.

What did I learn in my doctoral work? That compassionate communication isn't always easy, and it does come with risk – but if we are willing to make ourselves vulnerable, and to be genuine when we speak, and to build safe trusting spaces for dialogue – it changes us, and makes our lives better. It can inform the ways we talk about our faith and how we engage with political discourse, because we will always see the faces of our friends from this community looking back at us.

What we learn from this compassionate communication is that it can be life-giving and life-saving. It becomes ministry to a world that's forgotten how to communicate.

It's not about committing to do it on Sundays or Wednesday evenings, or during commission meetings. It's about fostering an environment where we learn *how* to do it in these places, and then take it out into the world – to take seriously the question etched into the stained glass over that exit door: “How do you go?”

The triumph of Palm Sunday comes not with what we say to *each other* when we enter the sanctuary, but with what we say to *everyone out there* when we exit the sanctuary.

Despite the work they knew awaited them, despite the fear of consequences, despite the confrontation they knew was coming: the disciples went on ahead. I pray God inspires us with their courage and that this continue to be so.