Sermon for Palm and Passion Sunday

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, April 14, 2019


Title: A place to stand

Imagine you’re sitting in your very first college class, feeling all the things: nervous, excited, worried about measuring up, eager to finally get started. The professor comes in, sets down an alarmingly tall stack of books and equally tall cup of coffee, flips a switch, and projects a map of the world onto the white board up front. She tells you that today you’re going to investigate your worldview, then pushes a button on her little remote, and the same map reappears, only this time its upside down. All the writing has been changed so that the map is still quite legible, but these so familiar forms and places, the curves of continents and curl of colors, look so different and distorted that you just can’t read it. Gone are the nerves and the joy, replaced instead by an overwhelming sense of disorientation.

She asks you to find various cities, and of course you know where they are. This is like 4th grade geography class! But with your world literally upside down, it takes forever: Paris, Mumbai, gah! You remind your eyes to look up for Cape Town, not down, and to search low for London, not high. And in your frustration a little annoyance with your professor, who seems to be enjoying herself just a bit too much, begins to creep in. Why is she doing this? Is she mocking you and your classmates?

Eventually she explains that this exercise was not designed to make you feel incompetent but to offer a taste of a skill you’ll be building up all semester, and hopefully for the rest of your lives: that of looking at the world differently. She reminds you that from outer space the earth has no up and down; that maps and globes and GPS systems only orient the way they do because the people who designed them wanted to be on top, and then depicted the world around them from that perspective. She reminds you that Europeans and Americans were not always on top: that the word “orientation” comes from the word for “Orient,” because that is the direction around which ancient maps were centered. She reminds you that the Nation-State as a way of organizing political life is just a few hundred years young, preceded by kingdoms and caliphates, empires and tribes, and that it will grow and change and one day be forgotten, too, meaning all

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1 This illustration is inspired by a class described by Barbara Brown Taylor in *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*. See pages 49-50 to read about her experiences.
those familiar lines will move and shift and face (indeed, we know from our live experiences that they always and already are). And, finally, she reminds you that your worldview is good. It is yours. It is beautiful. But it is only one of seven billion, none exactly the same, and that growing into adulthood means learning to hold it lightly, becoming ever more adept at seeing reality in different ways and from different perspectives.

Today, we begin our seven-days journey toward Easter. It is a journey that will end in joy, but not before we traverse the dry and barren country of Good Friday. We stand on the cusp of Holy Week looking out over a familiar map, and the challenge and the invitation this and every year is to be willing to have that map turned upside down - to have our world turned upside down – by the experience that lies before us. We begin, as we always must, where we are, with Palm Sunday: with Jesus entering the Holy City of Jerusalem atop a colt, his friends and followers lying cloaks upon the road before him: a makeshift red-carpet for a make-shift parade, crying “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

We are so used to celebrating this as a religious festival, a Christian holiday, a Church event, a moment in the liturgical calendar, a red-letter feast, that it can be disorienting to remember that the events we recall this morning were not, first and foremost, religious in nature. They were political. This was not a worship service. It was street art. Political theater. Think of a sit in. A Women’s March. Stonewall. Pop up protests. Graffiti. It was an uprising of the people, a parody parade mimicking and mocking the military might on display just on the exact opposite side of the city as Pontius Pilate, the prefect of the area, marched into Jerusalem gilded in gold and glory to ensure that pesky Passover celebration did not get too out of hand. To ensure those Jewish locals remembered their place in a Gentile world where Rome was most definitely on top. And because this was a political protest, the people – five? ten? a hundred of them? who knows – have the audacity to cry, “Blessed is the King” – the king! Not the Rabbi, the priest, the teacher, but someone to rival the very Emperor himself.

So, we are properly disoriented. We are upside down. We can’t tell our right from our left. And in creeps the discomfort. The suspicion. The tendency to hunker down. It might make us think twice about these palms we’re holding and what they really mean. After all, if this is a political protest, what issues are at stake? Is the crowd wearing blue or red? Is this the wave of populism that elected President Trump or the newest women to Congress? Are these people crying “Build the wall!” or “Abolish ICE?” Are they pro-choice or pro-life? Climate concerned
or climate deniers? Episcopalians or Evangelicals? For goodness sakes, Jesus, tell us! We need to know! Who are we standing with, and what are they standing for?

To which Jesus, who never once in his life answered an either-or question directly, might say something enraging like “yes.” Yes, this crowd is full of people you might agree with and others you might disagree with, might like and might dislike, might be enamored of and embarrassed by. Or, maybe, even more likely, he’d respond with a question. Something deep but vaguely threatening to our egos, like, “Who do you think you are?” “Where would you rather be?” or, his old standard, “What do you read in the law?” Who are we standing with, and what are they standing for?

I’d like to offer you the most comforting and least comforting answer imaginable, because I think it is the true one, and that is, quite simply, Jesus. We are standing with Jesus. We are standing for Jesus. If we would join the crowd, laying cloaks on the way, crying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” then there need not be any pre-requisite beliefs of positions barring entry. In fact, it is precisely this kind of either/or, us/them thinking that tends to unfold into othering: if you’re not with us, you must be against us, and all that jazz. And it is just a hop, skip and a jump from othering to dehumanizing, whether those people are defined by race, gender, sexuality, religion, class, or something else, or rather we justify distancing ourselves from them because of their ignorance, ideology, or immaturity. It’s the same game. It’s the same trap. The Empire always needs a “them,” and a huge part of Jesus’ earthly ministry involved lifting the veil that keeps us blind to the dynamics that divide. That keep us from seeing, and feeling, and drawing near to one another’s humanity.

For the last five years, Pádraig Ó Tuama has been the community leader of Corrymeela, Northern Ireland’s oldest peace and reconciliation organization. He is a poet and organizer, a Catholic whose faith has been shaped by the history and the hills and the heart of Ireland, and who grew up in the tumultuous and violent and bitterly divided north. Corrymeela became a place of refuge and a center of reconciliation in the years preceding the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and continues to be a spiritual center for neighbors of vastly different perspectives.

In a 2017 interview, he spoke eloquently and evocatively about what makes for belonging, that elusive but essential quality of human connection, saying that, “agreement has rarely been the mandate for people who love each other,” and noting how many friends and
lovers disagree deeply.\(^2\) (Like faith. Politics. Whether or not being 5 minutes late constitutes being on time.) As an alternative to thinking of belonging as being essentially about sameness – a flip of the map, perhaps - he focuses instead on trust, offering a soft and kind old Irish saying that roughly translates “You are the place where I stand on the day when my feet are sore,” he says.” It is a gentle yet robust way to imagine the ties that bind.

Who are we standing with, and what are we standing for? Jesus. He is the heart of the uprising we find ourselves caught up in this morning. Not an issue or a policy or a position, but a person: a person who gathered people from all sorts of walks of live with all sorts of wounds and wildness and wonder in their hearts, who had maybe only one thing in common, one thing that was enough – they had found the place to stand on the day when their feet were sore, and that place was him. He was their refuge: arms always open, heart always open, impatient, always, for their liberation and their fullness of life.

I imagine that in the crowd that gathered before Jesus was a man who held up his scarf to the sky, marveling at the crimson and gold and buttercup colors as the light filtered through each stitch, because he could see them! Because just months before this wandering healer, some nobody, paused by where he sat, dejected on the side of the road, and told him to stand up, and asked him what he wanted. And that stranger had done what no one else had been able to - no doctor, no poultice, no temple sacrifice – and had given him sight. Where else would he be but caught up in the moment, as long as it was with Jesus?

And there was a man and his eight-year-old daughter, a father who could not keep his eyes off of her beautiful olive skin and her dark hair blowing in the wind. A girl, a gift, whom he had taken for dead and would surely have lost had not this miracle man come along and assured him he was mistaken, that the child was only sleeping, and gave her back to him. Of course, they were there.

And there was the man who had been paralyzed since birth, leaning down and jumping up like a sprightly youth, laying every piece of fabric he could get his hands on upon the ground before the one who had healed him. And all the people freed from demons – too many to count, really – what joy, what presence they exuded, clear as day about where they were and what they

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were doing. Clear as day about who they were standing with and what they were standing for: him. The person who called them out of darkness and brought them into the light.

And there were the women he’d welcomed as disciples and friends; and there, members of the crowd he’d somehow fed with a little bread and a single fish; and there, people who’d heard him teach in the synagogues and just couldn’t get his words out of their heads. And maybe there were even people there like the Gentile he’d confused with all his talk about being reborn by the Spirit. People he hadn’t healed or obviously comforted, but who recognized something in him that had haunted them, that drew them to him, and gripped them with a longing and a need that simply would not let them go. Maybe these folks couldn’t tell you precisely why they were there, but they knew where they belonged. They, too, had found a place to stand on the day when their feet were sore, and having never known a gentler ground beneath them, they came.

Jesus was not running a campaign. It was not an election year. He was doing something far more radical: stepping entirely outside of the familiar social, cultural, and family systems around him to extend love, care and concern in all directions, which, yes, meant speaking up and criticizing all the things that get in the way of our doing the same day by day, which put him in direct conflict with those in authority. Jesus was impatient for a more just, more loving, more merciful world, and this week we are invited to walk with him as he confronts those who’d prefer the status quo. It might seem like foolishness to willingly journey from the joy of this day in Jerusalem through the garden and to the tomb: to step outside our regular routines and into the wilderness of life with him. But if we, too, have found in Jesus the place to stand on the day when our feet are sore, if we trust him, well, there’s simply no other place in this upside down world we could possibly be. Amen.