

Mark 11:1-11 | Palm Sunday | March 27, 2016

“A Mission not an Agenda”

Monte McClain

Our day is one in which we feel overwhelmed by the challenges, problems and changes surrounding us. And yet we're pressured not to act up, or out, but rather to conform.

A person in our church neighborhood this week asked me, attempting to tell me, that we need to stop doing our weekly Friday Night Meal for the hungry. We're bringing the wrong people in. The indigent, the ill, the “ugly, unsightful, the ones we want to forget” (is what he implied). Why don't you – (he didn't say the church) – feed them elsewhere. Cook the food here but deliver to where the people are, maybe where they should be – in People's Park, West Oakland, under the freeway. They don't belong here in Rockridge.

This person has bowed to a certain vision, in which things must be pretty, neat, tidy in order to be nice. Problems should go elsewhere. People problems cost too much. It's a drain on our society caring for such people. It distracts from our stores. It makes people uncomfortable. This person embraces a certain vision, and was again pushing me to conform to an un-named agenda. An agenda that goes against the basic tenants and teachings of the one I call Master. An agenda that undermines and goes against the mission of Jesus of Nazareth.

I'm not alone in that situation. Maybe in the specifics, but not in the spirit and general theme of it. We are encouraged to march to a certain drum-beat, to conform to the world in which we live, to not make too many waves, to even question ourselves, when we seem to go against the majority opinion. And yet is it the majority?

What that person doesn't realize is that I live in two kingdoms. And I know it. I struggle to own up to, to live into, to be coherent in my citizenship of America and Oakland, but first and foremost I am a child of God, an heir of the kingdom of God, a follower of Jesus. His teachings, my core values (as corporate America would invoke) are to be different. It's not about being expedient, doing what's easier or easiest, what's instantly rewarding, or costs me the least. I'm called to pick up my cross, to bear it, and follow after Jesus in his footsteps, in his way of life, in his example.

Je taught that we were to be non-conformist leader-disciples.:

- To love our enemies, to pray for them.
- To turn the other cheek when we are struck, to give also my sweater or shirt when someone asks for my jacket.
- To love my neighbor as God first loves me.
- To not worry about today or tomorrow, which have more than enough to worry about – God will take care of me.
- To love and care for those Jesus called the least of these – those on the margins and all-to-easily forgotten – the widow, the orphan and the refugee/immigrant
- That those who live by the sword will die by the sword.
- That we are called – as Paul said to the church in ancient Rome – to not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we might test and know and be the will of God in the world.

Our world today is one that doesn't recognize the kingship of Jesus, the burgeoning rule of God in the world which makes all things new. Our world is engrossed with notions and core values of:

- Refusing to collaborate and negotiate, wanting to annihilate adversaries and enemies at all costs,
- Demonizing the different, as not just divergent but as somehow less than human, gays should be put to death, women who were raped probably deserved it, black teenage males are all criminals and should be incarcerated to keep them and us safe.
- Mistrust and polarization, millennials are said to not trust anyone over 30 years of age (except for Senator Bernie Sanders); rural whites are said to mistrust anyone but their own as deceptive, dumb and possessed by the demon of political correctness, we easily IET-like accusations of misogynist, homophobic, racist, ageist, hater, communist without care or attention.
- We are encouraged to forsake compassion in order to embrace anger.
- To choose fear over hope,
- To embrace, nurture and pour forth our frustration through riots, violence, stalling of any forward motion, and retreating behind high walls for safety through isolation.

Today core values are associated more with profit than people, more with self-preservation than vocational fulfillment, more with pushing agendas than with living a mission.

We are shaped and formed, infected and informed by the core values of the businesses, corporations and communities around us. We conform, whether we know it or not, to their ways of doing, being and talking. In the Roman World the Empire would send groups of people out to settle elsewhere, to colonize the different. They would do that by setting up a community or a city, living in the Roman way, doing business with those core values, and that presence would impact and shape others, entice and enslave, it was conformity through casual contact, a minority changing a majority through transformational living.

The story we tell today is that of Palm Sunday, of the triumphant entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. It's a curious story, provocative, ironic, hyper-political.

- When the emperor, or a victorious general, returned to Rome after winning, they were welcomed into the metropolis with a triumph – a giant ticker-tape-parade in which they were celebrated and acclaimed by all the city, riding in on a war chariot- pulled by a stallion (a war horse) they were flanked by soldiers and swords, weapons and warriors. Following that glory would be the visible proof of their victory – imprisoned, injured and humiliated enemies defeated in battle – men, women and children, brought back as spoils of war. This was how power, royalty were recognized for the Romans.
- In Jerusalem Pontius Pilate arrived as the governor, entering the holy city – the city whose name means City of Peace in Hebrew – on a stallion, pulling a war chariot, accompanied by hundreds of Rome's fearful special ops soldiers.
- Jesus, acclaimed by his disciples, and most likely a smallish crowd of followers, is welcomed to the city with the liturgical greeting spoke to visitors arriving for worship in

the Temple – “Blessed are they who come in the name of the Lord.” Entering the city on a donkey, a normal beast of burden owned by many farmers, he symbolically claims the kingship – evoking the messianic promise of Zechariah 9:9 in which the Promised One of God would arrive on a colt. He rides in seated on the cloaks of his followers, placed on the donkey back: a sign of submission and obeisance. He arrives not to ticker-tape but to the cloaks of the crowd laid down on the street like a red carpet rolled out for royalty. He enters to the waving of palm branches, used at the Feast of Tabernacles, in the celebration of God’s royal presence in the Temple at the center of the city of Peace – Jerusalem.

Jesus is a nonconformist. He enters in a way that challenges the status-quo, that transforms the vision and understanding of power. He subverts the core values of justice through violence, of class warfare, racial inferiority, male supremacy, and spiritual hierarchy. We might expect such a peace-march scene to be punctuated with cries of “Power to the People!” “Black Lives Matter!” “Occupy” or “We are the 99%!” But the crowd that day calls out “Hosannah” “Save us Yahweh!”

Jesus enters into Jerusalem not with an agenda, but with a mission. He arrives not merely to chase off the Romans, not to lecture the religious authorities, not to make more room for the poor. He enters the city of Peace with a mission – that all peoples might know the salvation of God – a salvation that embraces the Jew and Gentile (even the Roman), male and female, free and slave. Salvation in that we are all new creations, called to live not in a world that is fading away, but in the glorious rule of God which already is here but not yet, breaking into the world through the power of the Spirit of God when we refuse to conform to the death-inducing, spirit-killing and human-denying ways of human society, going with the flow, maintain the status quo, asleep because of the somniferous agendas of the majority.

The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, is also the entry of Jesus into our lives – where he says “I stand at the door and knock, whoever open unto me, I will enter and eat with them and they with me.” Jesus comes to call us to stay awake, to not fall asleep, to keep our eyes on the prize. Jesus comes calling us not to “feel the Bern” “to make America great again” or “to make America kind again” but to be nonconformist agents of non-violence, to live in this world but of the kingdom of God, to embrace his mission even if it means going against the comfortable status quo of our community.

Final Hook –

In what ways do you need to give up your acquiescence to conformity
For fear, for comfort, for expediency, for ease,

Banners for Maundy Thursday – write down ways you no longer want to conform, ...