

A lot takes place between the time that Jesus enters Jerusalem with people waving palm branches and before his empty tomb is found by women. A lot takes place. And it's important to not just skip over from the fun parade with the waving branches which we all enjoy to the Easter celebration with the pretty dresses and Easter egg hunts. So before our next reading from Scripture let's fill in the details of what happens.

It's important to enter into as best we can the events that happen in between Palm Sunday and Easter. Because if we refuse to enter into the rest of the story then Christianity just becomes a feel good prosperity religion where worship tries to make everything look and feel wonderful. We enter into the whole story because our lives don't always go so well. The complexity of life and the reality of evil play a prominent role in the Holy Week story.

This week as I read through the Holy Week story as told by Matthew something became clear to me that I had never seen before. The Holy Week story as told by Matthew is an indictment against the organized church and organized religion. And since we here are the representatives of organized religion then we had best pay attention to how Matthew organizes the Holy Week events.

Jesus enters into the city of Jerusalem after preaching for 3 years throughout the countryside. He has traveled through many towns and encountered many different types of people. He has performed miracles and taught powerful stories all around the Sea of Galilee. But this is the week when we recognize that it is time for him to confront evil and the human predicament in a very real and difficult way. A time when he confronts the evil that is located within organized religion.

Jesus enters into Jerusalem on a donkey with the crowds shouting "Hosanna," a word which means "God save us." We celebrated that event today as we processed into the sanctuary. The way Matthew tells the story, Jesus then immediately enters the Temple, the center of religious life in Israel. Jesus does not even attempt to engage in prayer in the Temple before he is described by Matthew as one who overturns tables.

The gospel of John includes this story at the beginning of his account of Jesus but Matthew includes it here as Jesus enters into Jerusalem for his last week on earth. Jesus is sickened by how religious leaders have turned organized religion into a place focused on profit and greed. Jesus will have none of that. Jesus quotes Isaiah that the Temple will be a house of prayer.

Jesus then goes about changing the culture in the Temple. The blind and the lame come to him in the Temple and it is here that he brings them healing. But the religious leaders are furious at his actions. They now realize that his actions are going to undermine the religious institution that they have set up. They begin to question him but Jesus does not play by their rules.

Jesus begins to use the Temple as a place of teaching. He uses several parables to teach about God including one about how God will take away the kingdom of God from the religious leaders and give it to the people that will produce good fruit. Another parable is told by Jesus about how tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of heaven ahead of the religious leaders.

Another parable is told about how a man gives a wedding banquet and invites all of the important people in the town but none of them find the time to come. So the man then invites all of the outcasts in the city, the good and the bad, and it is these people who enjoy the feasts of the banquet. Another parable where the leaders of the organized religion are put to shame.

Matthew then records Jesus being asked about what is the greatest commandment. Jesus responds by saying that there are two. "You shall love the love your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." And the second greatest commandment is to "love your neighbor has yourself."

Jesus then denounces scribes and Pharisees. Scribes and Pharisees are the religious leaders and Jesus tells the crowd to not listen to them. No wonder Jesus is arrested for inciting riots.

Jesus calls upon the people to openly resist the leadership of the religious leaders. He calls these religious leaders hypocrites for how they are turning people away from God rather than toward God. He tells them that these religious leaders focus on the trivial while they ignore the deeper issues of justice and mercy.

Jesus says that the religious leaders look all nice and clean on the outside but that they are really filled with death and filth. And then Jesus really challenges what religion has become when he comes out of the Temple, looks back at the Temple, and declares that the temple will be overthrown.

We now come to the passage which we are about to read which drives the point home of Jesus' opinion of what has happened to the organized church. Earlier in the gospel of Matthew, the story is told of Jesus saying that the church will be built on Peter, the one called the rock. Peter is chosen by Jesus to be the disciple that the church will be built upon.

Just prior to this reading the disciples have gathered with Jesus for what we now know to be the Last Supper.

Read Matthew 26:31-35

Jesus is then arrested and brought before the high priest. Then we read this about Peter.

Read Matthew 26:69-75

I've heard some people look at the financial situation of Allison Creek Church throughout the years and conclude, "This church will soon run out of money and will no longer exist." However, if we read the Holy Week account from the Bible there is a different reason why the church will no longer exist. The church will no longer exist if we become preoccupied with our own institutional survival rather than the needs of mercy and justice that are all around us.

The church will no longer exist if we care more about protecting our buildings and property and personnel than about our neighbor. The church will no longer exist if we care more about being welcomed into the finest places rather than welcoming those on the margins into the kingdom of God.

I have been pretty blind to the indictment of organized religion that is found in the Holy Week story. It is a wake-up call for those of us that make up organized religion. The Holy Week story is a wake-up call for us within the church to remind us that we need to keep our eyes on Jesus and his call in our lives rather than gazing at our own navels.

If we keep our eyes on Jesus and follow the commandments to love God and to love our neighbor then everything that we need for effective ministry will be provided.

Maybe Holy Week this year is a time for us to be reminded that we should always stay focused on Jesus and his call upon our lives. AMEN.

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