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Sermon: Caught Up

The Epistle Lesson: Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The New Testament Lesson: Luke 19:28-40

²⁸After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"³⁴They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" ³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Sermon:

I've been struggling for a while now with a question. It's a nagging theological question, and Palm Sunday always seems to bring it out of me. See, I can't quite get my head around the relationship between Jesus Christ and power.

I grew up in the Southern Baptist Church. I grew up in the church where worship often ended with a song like "I Surrender All."

"I surrender all, I surrender all, all to Jesus, blessed Savior, I surrender all."

By the time I was in college I had fallen in with a more charismatic group of worshippers. We didn't just talk about surrender. We *surrendered*, hands in the air, eyes closed, like toddlers ready to be picked up by strong parental arms.

As foreign as some of those songs and postures feel to me now, I have not forgotten how powerful they felt, how immersed I felt in the presence of God in a visceral way I now rarely feel.

In a way it makes sense – to be fully absorbed into anything is to give oneself completely over to it. In those days I leapt into charismatic worship like a child jumps off a ledge, so confident they will be caught in their parents' waiting arms. They call that kind of worship being "caught up" for a reason.

Following Jesus, I believed, was all about surrender.

But then I moved into West Philadelphia. I joined an inner-city church that was boycotting the corner store across the street because they sold liquor to teenagers. *"Joining this church means abandoning that store,"* said the pastor, almost any time there was a new member, to thunderous applause. Wow, I thought. That's *power*.

Then I went to seminary and learned how the church was the anchor and cornerstone of the Civil Rights Movement. How the earthshaking promises of the prophets rattled the timbers of black churches and brought down Jim Crow. Wow, I thought. That's *power*.

Then I finally came out of the closet and met gay Christians and feminist Christians and black and brown Christians who said, “You know, actually, maybe surrendering is the last thing we need to do. We need to come out. Speak out. Cry out. Change the way this church and change this world. Wow, I thought. That’s *power*.”

Then I moved to Boston and joined GBIO, the Boston-equivalent of BUILD. I watched as congregations across the city united in favor of healthcare reform, citing the prophets, the widows, the orphan. I saw uninsured poor people from my own congregation on the front page of the New York Times as Romeycare was signed into law. Wow, I thought. That’s *power*.

So by then I was all about the power of the people and the justice of God. In fact, at some of those GBIO actions I actually did feel “caught up,” moved in the manner of those old charismatic services. But I was also so confused. What is the deal with Jesus Christ and power?

Our two Scripture readings today capture all the complexity of Christ’s relationship to power. The reading from Philippians is perhaps the quintessential text about Christ’s *weakness*. “Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.”

If this text is our guide, Jesus surrendered all, and therefore so should we.

But the other text, so expertly enacted by our kids a moment ago, is the story of Jesus’ power. At least as Luke tells it, this moment of arrival has been a long time coming. Jesus and his entourage have been traveling towards Jerusalem since chapter 9, with an increasingly level of controversy and conflict. He’s developed a reputation for performing miracles and confronting the powers that be. He’s developed quite a following amongst the working class. I hate to put it in these terms, but

Jesus had populist appeal and outsider status that would make Donald Trump jealous. The political and religious establishment were *afraid* of him.

And then, at long last, he arrives in Jerusalem, the capital city, the power center. And he makes a series of choices that suggest that Jesus is not nearly as uncomfortable with power as we might think.

He appropriates a local donkey. Our Bibles offer a very neutral translation of Jesus' instruction to the disciples: "Go into the village ahead and you will find a colt that has never been ridden." But the original Greek has a additional connotation of stealth or secrecy. You might say, "*Slip* into the village," or if you were feeling really edgy, "*Sneak* into the village." If anyone challenges you about liberating their livestock, just let them know, "The Lord needs it." Does that sound like a man who is shy about power?

Of course, the donkey itself is a power play. The prophet Zechariah long ago predicted that Jerusalem's new King would arrive "triumphant and victorious" on the back of a colt (9:9). Jesus is playing the part of that new king. Additionally, the palm leaf was a symbol of both royalty and revolution. Two hundred years earlier, when Israel successfully overthrew their Assyrian oppressors, they marched around the city with palm branches.

Is it any wonder that the religious and political leaders, nervous middlemen between the people and the Roman Empire, were getting anxious? They tried to silence him, worried that this rally would turn into a riot. "I tell you," said Jesus, "if these people were silent, even the rocks would cry out."

If this text is our guide, Jesus owned his power, and therefore so should we.

As a preacher, it's my responsibility to hold up these ancient texts and dust them off and ask what they have to say to our present moment.

The answer, I think, is that they say a lot but they also seem to contradict. It's hard to boil down to one tidy 140-character tweet.

What does it mean to be the Church of Jesus Christ in this present moment in America?

A few weeks ago someone emailed me a picture of this painting and I've been obsessed with it ever since.



It's called "Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889." It's the work of a Belgian artist named James Ensor, who created it in 1888. Today it's on display at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and as you can see from the picture, it's an enormous painting. Truthfully, it's a good thing that its so enormous, as it is so crammed with details that would otherwise be difficult to see.



First things first: the painting is called "Christ's Entry Into Brussels." But where is Christ? It's like searching a Where's Waldo illustration. After a few minutes of searching, I located him in the top third of the painting, just off-center. He's got an orange halo around his head and he's riding a donkey, just like in the scriptures. Otherwise, he gets lost in the composition, consumed by a crush of bizarre and multicolored figures.



It's worth paying attention to some of the other characters in the painting. Over here to the right you can see the mayor of Brussels, standing on a podium and holding a scepter. He appears ready to make some kind of pronouncement.



Near his feet is a banner that reads “Vive Jesus!” or “Long live Jesus!” This would suggest the celebration is at least ostensibly about Christ’s arrival. It’s interesting to note, however, a much larger banner that runs across the top of the painting reading, “Long live Social Welfare!” Elsewhere there is a banner advertizing Coleman Mustard. There may be a few different agendas here.

The religious leaders are present. Up at the very front of the painting you can catch a glimpse of the bishop. He’s wearing a tall bishop’s hat and has a monstrous expression on his face. He’s got a very long trumpet and is leading the people. He seems to have very little awareness that Jesus is present.



To the right of the bishop are a couple of older women that I can only describe as “church ladies.” They are wearing black dresses and bonnets. But you may notice that they are also joined by a witch.

The witch is just one of a number of figures in the painting suggesting a more ominous tone. You can see to the left of the bishop a man wearing a skeleton mask or a death-head. Many of the people are wearing

grotesque masks in the style of Carnival. Above the skeleton man is another man in the embrace of a woman. His eyes bulge out lewdly.





Right in front of Jesus is a marching band. The leader of the band wears many medals and medallions as though it's a military band. To his left is a sign which reads, "The Band of Bigots."



And then, my favorite detail – on the left-hand side of the painting is a small black mask. It's different from the other masks in the painting and bears strong resemblance to an African mask from the Congo. Why might Ensor have included this detail?



It seems that a scandal broke out in Brussels in the 1880's, when it was revealed that the beautiful, modern boulevards of Brussels had been built with slave money. King Leopold sold bonds to the Belgian people to create a colony in what became the Congo. He then enslaved and sold hundreds of Africans and used the funds to create the city depicted here.

All of the above constitutes Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889, at least in one man's imagination. The city is full of people, full of conflicting agendas and distractions and shady characters and mixed motives. Jesus is lost in the mix, but Jesus is right in the middle of it.





What must Jesus have thought, making his way through this circus? It probably wasn't all that different from Jesus thought when he made his way through the crowd to Jerusalem. Just beyond the scope of our

reading for today, Jesus actually breaks down into tears approaching the city gates. Luke says that “as he came near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, “If even you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!” he said. “But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed the days will come upon you when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you and hem you in on every side...because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.” (Luke 19:41-44)

Jesus, in his most triumphant moment, the epitome of his political power, is weeping. Why?

I think its because he realized, so viscerally, how deeply the people misunderstood who he is.

I think its because he realized how few of them actually even cared what he was saying or doing. See they are attracted to power like moths to the flame. They draw near in adoration but he already knows how quickly they will fall away when they begin to understand what it costs.

The painting here makes something clear that is not always easy to see. Our worlds are tiny and distracted and almost completely oriented around ourselves. It's so overwhelmingly true that it's hard to recognize. It's so powerful that when Jesus Christ – our very moment of visitation from God – draws near we *miss* him.

Or worse, we use him as a stepping stone to the almighty altar of Self.

We hunger for Christ's power while understanding nothing of his surrender. We misunderstand, and the results are grotesque.

There is no denying that we are currently in a frightening political moment. As line after line is crossed, one of the most distressing things is the ease by which Jesus, the Church, and people of faith are being co-opted in the name of this crude power grab. It happened this week when mega church-pastor Joel Osteen endorsed Trump as a true Christian candidate. There was the same kind of confusion in Brussels,

1889. There was confusion in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. You can't necessarily see it in the today's text but you better believe that Jesus sees it. Jesus is weeping.

As we step into these familiar texts and make our way towards the cross, I think we would do well to remember that Jesus turned the world upside down by embracing an entirely different kind of power. He was powerful, yes. He spoke the truth, yes. And so should we. But his power and his truth were always born out of a vulnerable, suffering love. This triumphant entry, this parade of palms – it only scratches the surface of the road that Jesus walked so that we would know decisively that we are loved beyond measure.

When you catch a glimpse of that love, you catch a glimpse of a great power.

We are called to surrender, yes, but here's what we miss. Surrendering to Jesus is only to un-tether ourselves from the relentless obsession with ourselves – what David Foster Wallace called “being lords of our tiny, skull-sized kingdoms.”¹ Surrendering all means discovering yourself all over again as a person who is loved and a person who loves, and that a person who loves fights for justice. That kind of love is very, very powerful.

I saw it last Sunday afternoon. I've been working with a group of young people from Sandtown for the past year, building relationships and trust and learning about what they would like to see from our city's next mayor. They came here to Brown and met with our young people. Fifteen of our youth joined them on stage last Sunday in a show of solidarity. Seventy-five of you were in the audience. I have to tell you that it was powerful to see them on stage, engaging directly with the candidates, sharing their stories, asking for better opportunities. That was real power, to be sure.

But just as powerful, maybe more powerful - was our evaluation, after the meeting, after the candidates were long gone. “How do you feel?”

¹ Just one piece of his brilliant Kenyon College Commencement address, delivered May 21, 2005. <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/DFWKenyonAddress2005.pdf>

was the question directed to the youth. "What's one word to describe how you feel?" "Phenomenal," said one. "Satisfied," said another. "Heard," said a third.

Heard. Heard by the candidates, maybe. Time will tell. But heard by you. Heard by a room of a hundreds of people saying, "You matter. You belong here. You are loved."

Heard by God. A God who poured herself out into human form, who gave away one kind of power to unleash another. A God who says to chronically neglected children - I hear you and I love you and things are going to change. Because if these people don't do it, even the rocks and rubble of our city will cry out the truth until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness an everlasting stream.

It is a powerful thing to be heard and loved by God. The question is – can we surrender our tiny kingdoms in exchange?

If you do, don't be surprised to find yourselves feeling the Spirit. If you do, don't be surprised to find yourself caught up.