

Sermon

January 29, 2023

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Would you please join me in a quick prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Amen.

So I was at Holden Village in 2019 in the summertime, doing some interfaith work up there with a rabbi and an imam. And I got a text message that there had been a noose hung in a public park in Anacortes. I think I talked to you all about this a number of years ago, but I've been reflecting on that a lot, lately.

So I came home a bit early; I came home a day or two early from Holden, because the person that reached out to me was a City Councilperson named Anthony, who was the first African American and openly gay member of the City Council in Anacortes. And Anthony needed some, wanted some help to talk about this at the City Council. So, Monday night I showed up, and I kind of came just a few moments late, and Anthony had already spoken about, about this noose being hung there; and I came in when a lot of the other people on the City Council were speaking about it.

And I want to be clear, that I *like* these people; like they're awesome. They're good servants. They're good public servants. And they really try, you know, and they're good-hearted. They have great values, you know.

But as I walked in and was listening, what I began to hear was things like, "Well, you know, we need to not give this any more oxygen. We need to not give this, this noose, any oxygen here, that's what they *want*. We just, you know, kind of stay quiet about it and it will kind of go away."

And I could see, you know, there was some tensions up there. So, you know, I walked in – and this is a good place for the Lutheran pastor-guy with his collar and his suit and his black shoes to walk up there. And so, I walked up to the microphone, having been invited to do so.

And I said, "Look, are we aware, in this room, that there were at least 50,000 (as of that time) cases of murder, by lynching, in this country's history?" And I said, "Are we aware of how that noose, hung up in the public park, impacts people of color, and people of different traditions, and people of different sexualities and gender orientations – how that impacts them?" And I said, "You know, there are some bacteria that of course, you know, do *better* with a lack of oxygen – that's where most of our sinus infections come from. So yeah, there are times when we don't need to amplify other people's messages and we don't need to give oxygen to certain things.

But sometimes we do."

And I went on to say that “You know, hate speech in this country is actually often protected speech. ‘The only remedy for hate speech is *better* speech,’ said some of the Supreme Court justices, “better speech, on behalf of religious leaders and community leaders, including people on the City Council.”

“So I would encourage this Council,” I said, “to form some policy around how you’re going to speak out, to use your freedom of speech.”

So we did some work with the City Council. They did most of it—I sort of suggested some possibilities and they really did a much better job of forming the legislation, because that is their job after all, and on the day when they were going to vote for that, there was a lot of debate. The debate on the part of *some* was that the City Council would be harming the freedom of speech of people in the community if the City Council spoke out against hate speech, which I found to be utter and patent nonsense. And so I said, “Look, it would be wrong of the City Council or departments in the city, that if someone engages in hate speech, that the City Council won’t hook up their water, won’t send out sewer service, and other kinds of things, and send out garbage service to their house. But,” I said, “You know, it is up to all of us and it is up to our public leaders who are elected to *lead us*, to use their freedom of speech to counteract hate speech.”

And so they did end up voting for it, although one voted no.

What we have started to learn in the last 50 years, is to appreciate more deeply within the Christian tradition of how *severed* we have been from the context of Jesus in his First Century leadership. Jaroslav Pelikan, whose name I don’t always say quite right, as well as James Cone, a famous black theologian, and many other theologians and historians, have said that, because we kind of got separated from our Jewish neighbors, by the end of the First Century we had lost sense, lost touch with, almost all of the context of Jesus’ life and ministry. Jaroslav Pelikan goes on to say, “the impact of that on the development of Christian doctrine cannot be underestimated.” So, we lost track of the context.

So I’m sure that for many of you, especially those of you that read the news, you’re aware as soon as I bring up, for instance today, this noose that was hanging up, you’re starting to think about other incidents across the country. You may even be thinking about what happened, what came out this week from the video in Memphis, right, about what happened to that young black man. There may be all kinds of hate incidents that are coming up into your mind. One hundred years ago, people would have to work really *hard* to recover what is for *us* a very visceral sense, probably, in the room. That’s the way context works.

So what we have to understand is that when Paul starts to talk about the message of the cross, and its foolishness, and the foolishness of God’s wisdom, well, there were some very visceral things that came up when they use the term “the cross.”

They would never, in the First Century, have put a cross up on a wall like this.

What were crosses used for? It is estimated that the Romans executed and engaged in a public, you know, sort of campaign of terror against occupied territories, by crucifying *between 10,000 and 20,000 people a year*.

Where would these crosses show up? Well, they would show up in public places. So when you walk into Jerusalem, what do you see? At the very least you see the upright posts on which people would be hanged. What you were likely to see is someone dying. Or you might see someone who had already passed away, hanging there. And what was that message?

Now I'm aware that that's a brutal thing to talk about. Don't think for a minute that I enjoy standing up here and saying that out loud. But just think about how that would feel, to see people who showed any kind of resistance at all to the Roman Empire hung up on crosses, with signs over them saying that they were thieves. Just imagine how that would feel.

Probably a lot like people of color feel when they heard in Anacortes that a noose had been hung in a park. As James Cone has pointed out, in his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*: a lynching rope and tree functioned like a cross in the First Century.

And so here we have Jesus, and here we have Paul, speaking about the message, about the cross. So, what did Jesus do, when he saw that his people were being intimidated by, divided up into little groups against each other, and kept enthralled and subservient to the Roman system through this governmental intimidation and terrorism? What did he do?

Well, the first thing he did was he left his home in Nazareth. He could have stayed. He could have stayed and like had conversation after every Shabbat service about how terrible the Romans were in whispered tones. He could have stayed in Nazareth and stayed away from anybody who wasn't like him. The first thing he did was that he left his home, and he engaged in public leadership. And if you notice what the shape of that public leadership was, everywhere Jesus went all kinds of people who were *not* supposed to show up with each other all of a sudden showed up in the room. So you see, you know, single women, you'd see Syro-Phoenicians and you'd see Samaritans and you'd see people of different socio-economic situations; people of different religious groups within Judaism would show up, and what he tried to do was to help them understand that they could, even though the Romans were terrorizing them into *not* doing it, that *they could still love each other as they love themselves*. And they did not have to live by this Roman standard of a bullying culture, in which you're only human if you have power; in which you're only human if you have public honor.

That's what the gospel lesson's about what it really should be translated as not blessed are the poor in spirit but "how honorable are the poor in spirit." Instead of being

shamed, they're being honored you see. So everywhere he goes, he brings folk together and they begin to start to learn how to love each other.

And of course, the Romans figure out that if Jesus and other people like him are able to bring people back to the core of their, of their core values as Jewish people that their rule is not going to last very long. Because when people aren't divided from each other, when people aren't hating each other, when people aren't separated, and begin to know each other, well, it's it's pretty hard for an empire like Rome to survive and thrive.

And so what did Jesus do? He knew that behaving that way, he knew that leaving his home, that relating to all these different people, beginning to give people hope and a sense of unity together, would be a threat to the Roman Empire. And he knew quite well – because it was eminently seeable, if you ever went to Jerusalem – where he would end up. He ended up on a cross, like another 10, or 15, or 20,000 people that year.

And then his resurrection is God's way of saying, "Yes, the Roman Empire has the power to crucify people. But the Roman Empire, even though they can threaten you – the Creator is the one that sets the tone for the creative world. And the Creator is going to raise Jesus from the dead, to teach you that when you leave your home, that when you relate to people of different cultures and traditions, when you start to help people recognize that we are in this together, and that we are all human, well, there might be some bad consequences with that, but if those consequences come, what's going to happen? You are going to be raised from the dead. And the power of God is going to be with you.

The Roman Empire has the power to crucify Jesus, *but they don't have the power to keep him dead*. They had the power to divide human beings from each other along lines of culture and tradition and socio-economic situation, to keep everybody split apart so they can rule, so they could benefit from all of the taxation, they could benefit from all the dirty deals that they did. But they didn't have the power to keep Jesus dead, and so therefore they don't have the power to keep us apart.

Instead of doing what other people did – going out to the desert and trying to keep away from it all, or becoming a collaborator and making deals with the Romans; instead of assuming that if we're just extra-religious, God will keep us safe in some kind of religious bubble – what Jesus does is he goes out and he engages in public, in relationship with a lot of folk, and reminds them that they don't have to live by the Roman culture anymore.

That's what he did.

He didn't believe in getting power over the Romans, like some of the revolutionaries wanted to do. He believed in a situation where we weren't trying to have power *over* but to have power *with each other*. This is what is meant by the Kingdom of God: a

community in which we engage each other with humility, across lines of difference, realizing that we're all made by one Creator.

Now the City Council in Anacortes, these really good people with excellent values, were kind of not able to perceive the meaning of that noose in the public park. Well, why was that? Unlike Anthony, who was an African American person who grew up in North Carolina, who's also a gay man who's experienced firsthand in very visceral ways, growing up every day in the South, what a noose symbolizes, and the reality that it creates in the school or in the community, where it kind of gives permission to people to be bullying to people that are different, many of the people in the City Council had not had that experience. And in fact, had just not related to enough communities of color, and not related to people across lines of difference. So that even though they had really great values, they really needed some help to see what that noose was implying about Anacortes, and what their *silence* was going to communicate about it.

And as we look across this country, as we look across Seattle, itself, even though there's a lot of multicultural work and a lot of inter-religious work that happens in Seattle, how many communities have wisdom, like this one, do not have any official, practical, or public relationship with people across other traditions?

And so what happens is, yes, we have good values, but we haven't maybe always listened deeply enough to the experience of other people to know what things mean, so that we know how we can behave, what we can say, to make a positive difference.

And so I want to challenge you today, as a congregation on your Annual Meeting day. And this is what I do, so, you know, I'm all about trying to create positive relationships between people of different traditions. You can certainly dismiss that if you want to, or think "well, this is just his schtick, you know" – but I really believe that right now, we have a country that is coming apart at the seams because we're not trusting each other, and a big part of that is because we don't know each other. Other people don't see us relating respectfully to each other. They don't see us partnering with people across lines of difference to build stronger communities. They just don't see it; and of course, the news and social media aren't going to amplify it.

But we have literally in this country in every single neighborhood, service clubs, and philosophy groups, and cultural groups. And we have Christian churches, and synagogues, and mosques, and temples, meditation groups, and all kinds of folk that are good-hearted. And what would happen if we did like Jesus and leave Nazareth and get to know each other?

Now in the text, Paul makes a critique of Jews and Greeks, which, you know, we've got to understand, he's not talking about all Jewish people, or all Greek people. He's making a critique. And the critique is, that "one's looking for signs and one's looking

for wisdom” – in other words, they’re sitting around debating stuff; they’re sitting around waiting for stuff to happen.

Part of the foolishness of the cross is that Jesus didn’t wait. He didn’t just sit around and debate. He didn’t stay passive. He realized that he had power, and that he could help other people find theirs.

And so what I want to encourage you to understand is what your power is. It is not a power in one snap of your finger to change the entire United States of America’s culture. It’s not about stopping social media from spreading lies and rumors and slander about each other. We can’t stop all the stuff that’s happening out there. But that’s not what Christian preaching is about. Christian preaching is “how can we live out the Spirit of Jesus?” How can we do what Jesus did in our own particular time and place?

And so what I want to challenge his congregation to think about is this: in the next couple of years, go out and meet some of your neighbors in other traditions and groups. Show up at *their* place. Just get to know them a little bit. Pick one or two you want to relate to, and start to even share stories once a year, start to do a service project once a year, show up in a public space together, honoring each other in public. And I think when you do, right, when we do that, other people begin to see a little glimmer of hope, other people begin to see “hey, we’re not as divided as we think we are.” We’re not as powerless as we presumed we were.

And some will tell you that it is foolishness, that that work will make no difference whatsoever, because you haven’t solved all the problems in the world, and so therefore why try – but that’s part of the foolishness of the cross. Did Jesus solve every problem on the earth through his cross and resurrection? What do you think? Right – No! I mean, Jesus died, and rose, and what happened the next day? The Romans killed another 200 people on the cross the next day! It didn’t change all at once.

But what would happen if we were just freed up enough in the Resurrection to do the work we’re called to do? You know, just do what we’re called to do. And trust that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will raise *our* little teeny actions into something that can help the entire world; here, and over on Capitol Hill, in Bellevue, and Redmond and Skagit County and Olympia and Lacey and Longview and on and on.

May the resurrection of Jesus help us to remember
that the foolishness of our mission and vision is a part of God’s wisdom,
to do our work,
and to trust in the power of the resurrection,
to bring it to completion.

Amen.