

Matthew 21: 1-17
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Out of Hand

Over the past few weeks, we have been puzzling over some of Jesus' most challenging parables, which form the bulk of his teaching during that first Holy Week. This morning's text from Matthew, starting with the first eleven verses that Jonathan read at the beginning of worship, take us back a few days to Palm Sunday and Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. It's tempting to linger on the entrance itself, to imagine the shouts of the crowds, and the waving branches. But as we listen to the text, we are reminded that everything and everyone is on edge. Jerusalem is in turmoil, stirred up, much as it was a few decades before when the wise ones arrived and asked Herod about the new king who had been born. This morning's text is set at the beginning of Passover, the high holy season when faithful Jews from all over stream to Jerusalem to celebrate and remember God's liberating the Hebrews, their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. Each year at that time, Rome brings in additional troops to make it clear that celebrating and recalling freedom from a tyrant centuries before should not give them any ideas. Caesar, through the likes of Pontius Pilate, wants to make it crystal clear that liberation from Rome is not an option. In fact, even toying with such a notion is considered treasonous. So, all of Jerusalem is stirred up again as her true king arrives not striding atop one of Rome's powerful war horses but humbly riding on a donkey signaling the coming of a different empire. And things get out of hand.

In Matthew's telling, Jesus heads straight to the Temple where he drives out those who are profiting from pilgrims who have come to worship. It is faithful and common practice in

Jesus' time for people to arrive in Jerusalem from farther afield and want to worship and offer sacrifices in this holy place. On the one hand those selling doves are providing a necessary service, enabling visitors to do what they have come to do, but as Jesus underscores, the system has also become corrupt and corroded. The Temple has been tainted by extortion, undermining its calling as a God's house, a place of prayer, worship, and welcome. By his actions, Jesus calls the system—and the religious leaders—into question. He turns over tables and pushes aside the chairs. He goes on a healing spree, it seems, curing the blind and the lame in this holy place that they were previously forbidden to enter. Jesus does not merely welcome them, he also heals and restores them in the midst of this sacred space. Jesus rightly notices that things have gotten out of hand in his Father's house; the religious leaders have lost sight of what they are called to do and what the Temple is built to be. God is not contained in the Temple, of course. God has never been boxed in by a building or a single tradition. The Temple is however a place set apart, a place where perhaps we are more attuned to God's presence, a place where the architecture, the hushed silence, and the light lift us up and points us more intentionally to this One who is the author of our lives, the One who has been at work saving God's beloved ones—including us—for millennia.

All the while, the children continue to chant the words and sing the songs they heard and sang on the way into town: *“Hosanna to the Son of David!” Save us, Son of David! Save us...that is what Hosanna means after all. Save us.* And the religious leaders get angry. *Things have gotten out of hand, Jesus, they seem to say. Do you hear what these children are saying?!? Do you hear what these children are saying?!? Yes, Jesus says. Yes, I do.*

Last Sunday, I was scrambling, scurrying around trying to find crayons and markers to use at our Pizza and Puzzles lunch after worship. I walked into the elementary Sunday school class to be greeted by proud grins and enthusiastic racket as the children showed off their carefully crafted—and very noisy—noisemakers. The teachers smiled at me a bit sheepishly and asked if it would be ok for the children to use them as we processed and sang this morning, a bit concerned about the noise and the ruckus in this sacred space. Honestly, I was a bit anxious about the ruckus, too. I try to be a good Presbyterian, a faithful leader, doing everything decently and in order...for the most part.

And then on Monday morning, as this text echoed in my head, word spread of the news of my beloved hometown being rocked—as too many others have been—by the violent deaths of children and educators in a church-related school. This school and its church sit atop a beautiful hill overlooking the part of Nashville where I took ballet lessons, where my family ate dinner after soccer games, and where I learned to drive in my mom’s station wagon. Violence, hatred, and utter brokenness invaded that place, just as they have so easily invaded too many other spaces, and the voices of children in Nashville and beyond persistently echoed in my ears, “Save us.”

Do you hear what these children are saying?!? Those voices are the last straw for the religious leaders in the Temple that first Palm Sunday. They are rattled by the ruckus Jesus is causing and encouraging in that sacred space. Perhaps those leaders are put out by the messiness of those coming to be healed, people who were not usually allowed within the Temple, but it is the children’s repeated cries calling out for a savior and Jesus’ refusal to silence those cries that get under their skin in the most profound way. Things have gotten out of hand,

it seems. The establishment, the ones who have a sacred duty to lead within and from that holy place hear something in the children's pleas that they do not like. Could those cries signal that not everything is within their tightly managed control? Could those cries be pushing them to face the ways they have put up barriers to God's healing and helping? Could those cries be inviting them to face the ways they have been complicit in the Temple's failing to be a place of prayer, worship, and welcome for the littlest and the least? We aren't told. Either way, Jesus is undaunted. He leaves the Temple for the evening, and he will return the following morning to teach and rattle them a bit more. In the days ahead, Jesus will tell those prickly and puzzling parables we've wrestled with this season. He will confront the religious leaders directly, holding them accountable for the ways they oppress those who are simply seeking to be faithful, those who are crying out for God's healing, those who are looking and longing for a Savior. These leaders will determine that Jesus himself has gotten out of hand and that he must be stopped.

And yet the songs of the children will echo through the coming week. Shortly before Jesus is betrayed and abandoned, his friends will gather for a last meal with him. The powers that be will arrest him, beat him, try him, and kill him, but they will not be able to stop the holy disruption he has stirred up. They will not be able to quiet the cries of the children, the very ones shouting, "Save us!" *Do you hear what these children are saying?!?* They know Jesus to be the Son of David; they are convinced that he is the very One who can in fact save them.

Through our time with Jesus and some of his most puzzling parables this Lenten season it should come as no surprise that Jesus does not come to bless the status quo. He does not come to make everything pretty or nice. Jesus comes to make things right, to usher in God's reign of peace, justice, love, and mercy. Jesus does not come to make us comfortable. He

comes to make us whole. He comes to save us, to save all in a way that no earthly empire can.

That is why the children sing; this is why the children shout.

Things have gotten out of hand, dear ones. Hatred, violence, division, self-righteousness, cynicism, and blame fester and run rampant. May God give us the ears to listen to the children's cries and the courage to join them. Together with them may we sing and shout and cause the holiest of ruckuses in the name of Jesus Christ, the One who is still determined to save us one and all, the One who is still blessedly out of hand.

Thanks be to God. Amen.