

Lenten Sermon Series: (Re)Discovering Jesus: Rebel, Revolutionary, Radical

Sermon Title: "The Way of the Cross"

Luke 19:29-39; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22 & 23

Salem United Methodist Church

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Today is the last Sunday in Lent. During this time we have been exploring the countercultural nature of Jesus. His teachings, life, and even the surrender to death were the opposite of the first century culture and they still are today. Jesus as the Son of God came to earth to draw us closer to God. And as we are drawn closer to God, we are drawn closer to each other. Jesus is the embodiment of God's love. In a world that honors hate, promotes exclusivity, and values greed, Jesus came to save it.

There is a poem written by Linda Ellis called "The Dash." This nine verse poem reflects on the two dates on a tombstone: the birth date and the death date. Usually between the two dates there is a dash which represents everything that happens between birth and death. Listen to some verses from "The Dash." "For it matters not, how much we own, the cars...the house...the cash. What matters is how we live and love and how we spend our dash. If we could just slow down enough to consider what's true and real and always try to understand the way other people feel. And be less quick to anger and show appreciation more and love the people in our lives like we've never loved before. If we treat each other with respect and more often wear a smile, remembering that this special dash might only last a little while."

Jesus was very well aware that his "dash" was only to last a little while. His life was on a collision course. There were three kingdoms about to collide and he was smack in the middle of the collision. Today we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem as we shout, our "Hosannas" and next week we will sing our "Alleluias" as we celebrate his Resurrection, but we cannot forget that there was a major collision that happened in between; a collision that reset the course of the world forever. There is an idiom that goes something like this: if we knew what tomorrow would hold, we would not be able to live today. Did Jesus know what his tomorrow would be as he rode into Jerusalem? Or was he drawn to this holy city like a moth to the light? Did he know that his kingdom would collide with the world's kingdoms?

In the first century Jerusalem, there were two kingdoms that were in conflict with the kingdom that Jesus proclaims. One kingdom was the Roman government. Through military force, the Roman Empire conquered Israel and occupied it for nearly one hundred years by the time Jesus entered the holy city of Jerusalem. The military kept the "Pax Romana" or the Roman peace with their power. Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect in Jerusalem, made sure that peace was kept with an intimidating execution device called the cross, and he would enforce Roman authority with anyone who challenged it. The second kingdom was represented by the aristocratic elite who were the religious authorities. Their mission was no longer about following the holy Jewish texts of the Law and the Prophets, which speak repeatedly of caring for those living on the margins: the poor, the widow, the sick, and the immigrant. They no longer regarded God's redemptive mission of justice and righteousness as their mission. Their sole purpose was to secure their personal lavish lifestyle and insure the religious institution of the Temple with all its traditions. So they placated to the Roman authorities. They compromised their beliefs to protect their way of life.

Two kingdoms: one who ruled by fear and coercion. The other who did whatever was necessary to keep the ruling kingdom happy. Both were preparing for the Jewish Passover. The Romans reinforced their occupation forces on Jewish high holy days to discourage any attempted insurrection by rebel leaders who might take advantage of those who made the pilgrimage to the

Temple. Many self-proclaimed messiahs would plan various acts of terrorism during holy days when the streets were filled with pilgrims as an attempt to deliver Israel from their Roman occupied oppressors. These messiahs wanted to take back their nation and make it great again like it was in the time of King David. So as the Roman military was preparing itself for any kind of disturbance, they rode through the west gate on their strong, mighty horses displaying their military power cheered on by the aristocratic religious elite.

And then Jesus rides into the picture through the east gate. He does not ride on a strong horse, but on a colt, baby donkey or horse that had never been ridden. Can you imagine a tall man holding up his feet to keep them from dragging, as this frightened animal is bucking and running in different directions through the crowd? He has no sword or armor, only a group of ordinary working-class folks cheering him on by waving palm branches and laying their outer cloaks on the ground. Some were there out of curiosity. Some hoped he would be the messiah that would deliver them from the Romans. While others were there hoping that he would heal them or their loved ones. Jesus had proclaimed that his kingdom was not of this world. He had demonstrated that his kingdom was one of love and forgiveness. These three kingdoms collided as they converged on Jerusalem creating the most dramatic week in human history. As God incarnate, as God in human form, “he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8). Jesus subjected himself to these two kingdoms. He was crucified not because he was a country rabbi, but because his teachings were threatening both the political and religious kingdoms. The religious authorities handed him over to the political powers saying that Jesus was threatening the nation by saying that is a king, the Messiah. He was condemned by the religious elite and condemned to death on a cross by the Romans for political treason. Which kingdom changed and still is changing the world?

At the beginning of Lent I asked us two questions that Jesus asked, “Who do you say I am?” (Luke 9:20) and “What advantage do people have if they gain the whole world for themselves yet perish or lose their lives?” (Luke 9:25). How do you answer these questions? During Lent, we described Jesus’ teachings as rebellious, revolutionary, and radical. When Jesus tells us to deny ourselves, and to pick up our cross daily, and follow him, what did he mean? Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers one answer. He states, “The cross is not misfortune and hard fate. It is instead the suffering that comes from being bound to Jesus Christ. The cross is not accidental, but necessary suffering. The cross is not suffering bound up with natural existence, but suffering bound up with being a Christian.” When we follow Jesus in the way of the cross, we give ourselves completely and sacrificially for the concerns of God’s heart. When we say, “Yes,” to Jesus we strive to be like Jesus, to do like Jesus, to give like Jesus, to love like Jesus. Bonhoeffer also wrote, “Although we are not Christ, if we want to be Christians we must participate in Christ’s magnanimous heart by engaging in responsible action that seizes the hour in complete freedom, facing danger.” This is not a volunteer position, in which we can say, “I’ll be there if I have time, if it’s not too inconvenient, or if it doesn’t conflict with other things in my life.” To follow Jesus we offer ourselves as servants who act sacrificially. To follow Jesus is to decide which kingdom we live in. Do we live in Jesus’ kingdom which is one of love and not coercion, one that includes everyone and excludes no one, where all are accepted, where sacrifice, not greed is a way of life, where there is forgiveness? One wise person stated that in order to forgive something has to die. In order for us to forgive, we have to die to bitterness, revenge, thinking more of ourselves than we ought to, to our sinfulness. Then we can both forgive others and receive God’s forgiveness. Could Jesus’ pronouncement from the cross, “Father, forgive them,” offer us grace to follow yet again, no matter how many times we fail to pick up the cross? Which kingdom are you committed to? Does your heart lay with Christ’s magnanimous heart? How are you spending your dash? Are you living the way of the cross?

Resources: *The Renegade Gospel* by Mike Slaughter; “The Dash,” www.linda-ellis.com;

