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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
2nd Sunday of Lent
February 24, 2013
Luke 13: 31-35

“Re-imagining God”

In last week’s sermon I said that Lent (which means spring) is a great time to do some spring-cleaning of your soul. I said you might hear some things or learn some things that challenge you and require you to do some *deep* cleaning of your soul.

I think you’ll hear things today that challenge you, unless you’re one of those rare people who love it when the church and politics get cozy with each other. But most people do not like it when the church and politics collide and get understandably nervous when the two do. Most people want the church to stay out of politics and politics to stay out of the church because there is a poor track record when the two mix.

Most people, I think, want to go to church to hear and learn about God and Jesus. People want to hear words of comfort, reminders about how we can lead better lives, and maybe some ideas about how we can do that. We don’t want church to be a source of conflict, which bringing politics into the mix can do.

But I think one of the reasons we don’t like it when the church and politics collide is because we think it’s wrong and contrary to the teachings of Jesus to get mixed up in the messy affairs of politics. I think there are an awful lot of people who assume Jesus was innocent or ignorant of the realities of the politics of his day and just went around welcoming children, healing sick people, and feeding poor people. In other words, Jesus was “nice” and did “nice” things; he didn’t get involved politics. But that assumption isn’t true; Jesus was heavily involved in the politics of his day, and some scholars now think that his involvement led his to his crucifixion.

You know, Jesus doesn’t suddenly show up in Jerusalem and get executed for no reason. There are many incidences that led him to Jerusalem which contributed to his trial and execution. Jesus was revolutionary and tried to change the world, but the world, especially the political leaders, resisted him.

The leaders didn’t think Jesus was nice, and Jesus’ mission-contrary to popular opinion-wasn’t to be nice. (This isn’t to say that Jesus’ wasn’t nice, but that was not his primary mission.) Jesus’ mission was to proclaim the coming kingdom of God and that was an affront to the powers that be. I’ve said it before but I think it’s worth saying again, that there can only be 1 kingdom at a time. So if you have some troublemaker on the loose like Jesus proclaiming that another kingdom is at hand, well something needs to be done about that troublemaker. If you’re Herod or the Pharisees or just a regular Joe who benefits from the current status quo, you don’t want someone running around saying

everything's going to change, especially when the changes he preaches are going to negatively affect you.

Jesus tells it like it is: "the first will be last and the last will be first." Well, the Pharisees and Herod who occupy a favorable, first place position in the kingdom, don't want to hear that. So the alarm bells go off-something has got to be done *once and for all*.

"Jesus," the Pharisees say, "You better get out of town because Herod wants to kill you." Now, do not be deceived by the niceties of the Pharisees, because their warning was a self-serving move. The Pharisees are in cahoots with Herod and hope to drive Jesus out of Herod's jurisdiction and make him Pilate's responsibility. Herod was a trivial leader who liked power but not the responsibility that went with it; the last thing he wanted was to be blamed for Jesus' execution. So the sooner he can pass the buck off to someone else, the better. It's sort of like the state passing the buck to the federal government or vice-verse because neither one wants to take any heat for a difficult decision, especially in an election year.

Jesus responds to their thinly veiled attempt at friendliness with a response that makes it quite clear he knows exactly what type of political move they're making: "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way . . .'" He's fully aware that the mission he proclaims and enacts by casting out demons and performing cures, especially among the poor and neglected, is an affront to those in power.

But then Jesus pushes the envelope just a bit further, and informs the powerful people that his challenge will go all the way to the top. He will not stop in the provinces, but will proceed to the capital city of Jerusalem. So Pilate will be confronted soon enough. It's as though Jesus makes it clear that the discomfiting politics of God's kingdom will not stop at the doors of the statehouses in Jefferson City, or Montgomery, AL, Springfield, IL or any other state capital, but will go to the ultimate stop: to Washington, DC and the steps of Congress, the Supreme Court and the White House. And not for a second does he hold any illusion that those entities will welcome him with open arms. Jesus knows that all too often dreams of change die at the doors of power. As he says today: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!"

Jerusalem, which ironically means "city of peace", was notorious for rejecting and executing God's prophets. When the prophet Uriah dared to speak out against the kingdom of Judah, "the king struck him down with the sword and threw his dead body into the burial place of the common people." That's a direct quote from the book of Jeremiah. During the reigns of kings Ahaz and Hezekiah, the prophet Isaiah tried to challenge the idea that the monarchy and God were completely in sync because by that time, they were not. Prophets tried to remind the kings and other bureaucrats that they had a duty to God to maintain a kingdom of justice of righteousness *for all*, but they

didn't want to hear that message because it didn't serve them. So eventually Isaiah declared that God would have to do "a new thing" (Isaiah 43:19).

This new vision must have been on Jesus' mind when he looked toward the city that would ultimately reject him. He lamented how often he desired to gather its children "as a hen gathers her brood under her wings," but many of the people didn't want any part of that, because his interests didn't serve their interests. And they feared that if they allowed themselves to be taken under his wing, then they might just have to change their ways. And fear, you know, can cause people to do reckless things, like take aim at the wrong person. Fear was the driver behind Herod and Pilate's leadership. Fear is what drove the final nail into Jesus' cross.

And yet what does the Bible tell us again and again? Fear not. It's what the angel told Mary when she found out she was expecting: fear not. "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Yet twelve chapters and 33 odd years later, that good news doesn't sound so good anymore. It sounds hard. It's challenging. It pushes the envelope. It's more than we can or want to handle. Jesus calling us out of our complacency; calling us to care deeply, to live passionately, to show love to everyone, to share our resources, and to work for causes that matter-well, that requires more time, work or money than many people want to give. So we tuck Jesus back into our "nice" box, and hang pictures of him where he is surrounded by children, and tell the church to stick to spiritual matters and leave the politics up to Washington. That doesn't make a lot of sense, but then again we're pretty good at making Jesus into who we want him to be-and a political, in your face, I'm going to push the envelope Jesus is not at the top of the list.

A few years ago, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a book titled An Altar to the World, in which she explores some well known and some now well know spiritual practices. It's from her book that I got the idea of asking all of you to take part in the spiritual practice of getting lost. The first chapter of the book is titled "The practice of waking up to God." She argues, quite convincingly I think, and in a way that dovetails so well with today's gospel, that too many of us have convinced ourselves that God is chiefly interested in the things in which we are interested in, and that God and Jesus are to be found in the church because we are the caretakers of God.

But Barbara Brown Taylor says this is rubbish. The truth is, Taylor writes, "many of the people in need of saving are in churches, and at least part of what they need saving from is the idea that God sees the world the same way they do." She argues that it is time to wake up to God, the God who is in the world, not contained in these four walls, and who loves the world so deeply that He gave His only Son to it. It is time to wake up to God, the very God who pushed the envelope, and who stepped into the messy world of politics in order to usher in God's kingdom, as opposed to the kingdom that we want and that benefits us.

The Old Testament kings and bureaucrats believed God saw the world the same they did; the leaders in Jesus' day also believed that, and many people today believe that. But Jesus, just like the prophets of old, said no. You've got it wrong. You've got to start envisioning God differently, because God isn't interested in serving your self interests, God wants you to serve God's self-interests . . . and sometimes they will be in sync, but sometimes they won't.

The writer Frederick Buechner once suggested a little spiritual exercise to alert ourselves to the discomfiting breadth of God's self-interest. Buechner said, "The next time you walk down the street, take a good look at every face you pass and in your mind say: Christ died for thee. That girl. That slob. That phony. That crook. That saint. That damned fool.." ¹

This week, I'm asking you to take part in that spiritual exercise. Pay attention to the people you see and meet, take a good look at their face, and say to yourself: Christ died for thee. When it makes you uncomfortable to say that about someone, you'll know you're starting to see things the way God wants you to see them.

Jesus wanted nothing more than to gather all of God's children into God's embrace; like a mother hen gathers her chicks he said. This is the good news. The bad news is that doing this ruffles people's feathers. It doesn't seem like it should. After all, wanting to gather all of God's children into God's embrace seems like the nice thing to do. But as we see in Jesus' political system, just like we do in our own, not everyone wants everyone included in the fold.

God calls us to build a kingdom built on justice, inclusiveness and righteousness. God calls us to build this kingdom even when the way is difficult and the obstacles seem insurmountable.

John Calvin once said: "For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome and unquiet life." It's not the message we want to hear, but it's the message we need to hear and it's the message we're reminded of as we make our way to Jerusalem.

Amen.

Sources:

"Feasting on the Word", Year C, Volume 2, 2nd Sunday in Lent