

March 25, 2018

John 12:12-27; 19:16b-22

Parade or Protest?

This is another picture of the march yesterday ...

This was the scene on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC as hundreds of thousands of young people in Washington, and in 800 cities around the world protested gun violence and advocated for stricter gun laws. The event was started by the students at Margory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, where 17 of their friends were murdered by a lone gunman just over a month ago. They seem to have started an historic movement for social change.

Someone asked in the online biblical discussion group this week, **"Is Palm Sunday a protest or a parade?"**

It generated lots of comments ... including "if it is one or the other, which one do you choose?"

Jenny Drewitz, the Associate Minister at First Baptist Church down the road, was telling us this week at the lectionary group study that last year, at New York's Riverside Church, the children processed into the church waving protest signs instead of palms.

Maybe **the answer to the question, "is Palm Sunday a protest or a parade?" is "it is both."**

Aa month ago President Donald Trump said that a **military parade would be great for the country's spirit.** He said he was inspired by the Bastille Day parade in France. The idea was welcomed or critiqued, depending **of course on which "side" you were on. But some** pointed out that perhaps the billions of dollars that it would cost could be better spent supporting veterans directly, many of whom are in financial need.

Trump got **his parade it would seem ... perhaps** just not the one he was thinking about.

Theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, **in their book "The Last Week"**, suggests that in fact there were two processions ... **two parades ... into Jerusalem that day ... one from** the western gate, and Jesus and his followers from the eastern gate.

The procession at the western gate would have been the imperial Roman army, marching into the city on war horses to keep the peace and maintain order during the Jewish festival of Passover, when the population of the city would swell from 50,000 to 200,000. The celebration of Passover was a celebration of the liberation of the Jewish people from Pharoah in

Egypt. Understandably, the Roman authorities might be a bit nervous about the celebration of an event that liberated oppressed people from their oppressors and would want to put on a show of power and might.

In typical fashion, Jesus takes the symbols of the day and turns them upside down. The arrival of a king on a humble donkey was a prophecy from the Jewish scriptures in the book of Zechariah. This was a symbol that the Jewish people would have recognized.

But in doing this, Jesus is thumbing his nose at the authority of the empire. He is showing that his kind of king is very different than the Roman one.

Parade or protest?

People are always surprised when I take groups to Northern Ireland each year when they learn about the parades. In 2017, there were 4,394 parade notifications according to the Northern Ireland Parades Commission, whose duties and functions, under the Public Processions (NI) Act 1998

include:

- To promote greater understanding by the general public of issues concerning public processions.
- To promote and facilitate mediation as a means of resolving disputes concerning public processions.

- To keep itself generally informed as to the conduct of public processions and protest meetings.

The majority of the parades in Northern Ireland are not contentious, but there are a small percentage that are. These parades are the ones that divide communities and sometimes even lead to violence. It is sometimes impossible for visitors to comprehend. But some of these parades are all about identity, and history, and reminding people who has the power, or who they think has the power. The most contentious parades are the ones that march right through a community – for example, a unionist/loyalist/protestant parade through a republican/nationalist/catholic community.

One conflict mediator described it like this: “It’s as if someone just opened your front door and a whole pile of people walked through your house, without permission, and out the back door. And they are playing loud music, and carrying pictures of a king that conquered your people **over 300 years ago.” That’s** what some of the unionist/loyalist/protestant parades feel like, especially around July 12.

We should be able to understand the power of symbols, and how they evoke strong feelings for certain groups of people. Look at the recent conversations, protests, and incidents around the Cornwallis statue in this city, and the feelings that his name evokes for our aboriginal brothers and sisters.

Symbols are powerful. They sometimes are at the heart of our identity, our history, our ideology.

This brings me to the cross.

We will see a lot of that symbol this week. We will see other parades and processions in news stories from around the world, some re-enacting the last walk that Jesus took while carrying the cross on which he would be crucified.

The readings for today take us back in time to read the story of the entry into Jerusalem – you may have noticed that it happens in Chapter 12, and in the second reading we have taken up right where we left off **last week, with Jesus' encounter with Pilate.**

We move from story of the parade, or the protest, **depending on how you see the story ... to Jesus' death.**

This is the Sunday when preachers and worship planners try to make a tricky turn in the service – **“from Palm to Passion” we sometimes say ... to** move from the

excitement and hopefulness of Palm Sunday to the reality of the death of Jesus on the cross several days later. **It's not an easy turn to make.**

And the cross is a central symbol this week.

A quick search will tell you that in fact crosses are very old. Their depictions have been found engraved on flat pebbles in a cave in the Pyrenees dating from 10,000 BCE. Many examples of pre-Christian crosses are depicted in Eastern and Western cultures across the world.

In the Roman Empire, it was how they executed criminals. It is a symbol of extreme pain and suffering, and cruelty. Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber, in a brilliant youtube video, challenges some of the traditional theologies of the cross ... that somehow God demanded payment for our bad behavior, and Jesus would take the punishment instead of us. Or, that the death of Jesus was a legal transaction between us and God to compensate for all the bad things we had done.

The problem with these atonement theologies, Bolz-Weber says, is that it takes the most disturbing human characteristics of vengeance and greed and projects them onto what God is like.

She says that God does not stand above the cross, looking down, but God hangs on the cross, **saying “this is the logical end of your value system I am not going to lift a finger to condemn those responsible, I would rather die.” This, she says, is God’s self-revelation and God’s judgement – forgiveness.**¹

Theologian Richard Rohr says that “Christians have paid a huge price for what theologians ... called “substitutionary atonement theory” — the strange idea that before God could love us God needed and demanded Jesus to be a blood sacrifice to atone for our sin-drenched humanity. With that view, salvation depends upon a problem instead of a divine proclamation about the core nature of reality. As if God could need payment, and even a very violent transaction, to be able to love and accept “his” own children ... *Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity (it did not need changing)! Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.* God in Jesus moved people beyond the counting, weighing, and punishing model, that the ego prefers, to the **utterly new world that Jesus offered, where God’s abundance has made any economy of merit, sacrifice,**

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k60Ys9GXHSs>

reparation, or atonement both unhelpful and unnecessary.”²

In another article, Rohr writes: “The mystery of the cross is saying that human existence is neither perfectly consistent ... nor is it total chaos Human existence ... is filled with contradictions. To hold the contradictions with God, with Jesus, is to be a Christian and to share and participate in the redemption of the world ... It feels like a forgiving of reality for being what it is.

If the choices are either perfect consistency or utter chaos, don't go there. The cross is holding the middle. The world is neither particularly consistent nor total chaos; it's a coincidence of opposites, and even geometrically that forms the cross. The price you pay for holding together the contradictions within yourself, others and the world is always some form of crucifixion, but the gift you receive and the gift you offer is that at least in you -“everything belongs.”³

That’s a new way of thinking about the cross for me ... to think about that place in the middle, where our contradictions meet. Where God is on the cross.

² <https://cac.org/love-not-atonement-2015-03-20/>

³ <http://spiritofstephens.org/resources/prayers-and-theme-readings/1380-the-mystery-of-the-cross-richard-rohr-ch-9-things-hidden-scripture-as-spirituality>

Let me finish with some words from an online article from Mother Jones about the march yesterday:

“Six minutes and about 20 seconds. In a little over six minutes, 17 of our friends were taken from us.” That’s how Emma Gonzalez, a senior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and one of the organizers of the March for Our Lives, began her remarkable speech on Saturday afternoon at the rally in Washington, DC.

After reading the names of her classmates who were killed in the mass shooting, Gonzalez stood at the podium in silence for six minutes, fighting back tears. It was an incredible, chilling moment. All of the major cable networks carried it live. **“Loudest silence in the history of US social protest,”** my colleague David Corn tweeted.⁴

Parade or protest? Which do you choose?

As we journey towards the cross this week, as we move into our Annual Meeting right after this service, **may we take time to think of that place in the middle**

where our contradictions meet where we find a coincidence of opposites Where we meet God in all our human frailty.

Thanks be to God.

⁴ <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2018/03/emma-gonzalez-is-responsible-for-the-loudest-silence-in-the-history-of-us-social-protest/>