

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Palm/Passion Sunday – April 9, 2017

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Matthew 21:1-11

For Reflection

"We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies."

~ Pablo Picasso, Spanish artist (1881-1973)

"The artist is the opposite of the politically minded individual, the opposite of the reformer, the opposite of the idealist. The artist does not tinker with the universe, he recreates it out of his own experience and understanding of life."

~ Henry Miller, American author (1891-1980)

Art and Protest

I grew up during the Vietnam War (not to mention Civil Rights Movement, Women's Rights Movement, Farmworkers' Rights Movement, and more) – with parents who were social activists. We were exposed early in life to various forms of protest – street theatre being a particularly powerful medium for young minds. When my father was campus minister at Cal State Fullerton, a street theatre group was not allowed to perform on campus – so we all gathered in a nearby orange grove for the performance. Over the years, we attended a number of marches – most memorably the Mobilizations for Peace in San Francisco – where the San Francisco Mime Troupe took on the social issues of the day. The marches themselves took on the atmosphere of street theatre with ALL of us actors on the world stage.

To define terms:

Street theatre is a form of theatrical performance and presentation in outdoor public spaces without a specific paying audience...

Street theatre is arguably the oldest form of theatre in existence...

One of the most interesting points about modern street theatre is its unique sociopolitical place. People who might not have ever been to, or been able to afford to go to, the "legitimate" theatre can watch a street show. By virtue of where the shows take place, their audience is made up of anyone and everyone who wants to watch. If an audience member cannot afford it, then it is free...

Performance artists with an interest in social activism may choose to stage their work on the street as a means of directly confronting or engaging the public...

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_theatre

Some of us are old enough to remember The Capitol Steps which began in 1981 as “a group of Senate staffers who set out to satirize the very people and places that employed them.”

Their first idea was to stage a nativity play, **but in the whole Congress they couldn't find three wise men or a virgin.** So, they decided to dig into the headlines of the day, and they created song parodies & skits which conveyed a special brand of satirical humor.

Over the years:

Taken together the performers have worked in a total of eighteen Congressional offices and represent 62 years of collective House and Senate staff experience.

<http://www.capsteps.com/about/>

None of us are old enough to have experienced ancient Greece. However:

In the history of theatre, there is long tradition of performances addressing issues of current events, especially those central to society itself. **The political satire performed by the comic poets at the theatres had considerable influence on public opinion in the Athenian democracy [circa 5th century b.c.e.]** Those earlier Western dramas, arising out of the polis, or democratic city-state of Greek society, were performed in amphitheaters, central arenas used for theatrical performances, religious ceremonies and political gatherings; **these dramas had a ritualistic and social significance that enhanced the relevance of the political issues being examined.**

Shakespeare [1500's] was an author of political theatre according to some academic scholars, who observe that his history plays examine the machinations of personal drives and passions determining political activity and that many of the tragedies such as *King Lear* and *Macbeth* dramatize political leadership and complexity subterfuges of human beings driven by the lust for power...

Historically in Soviet Russia, the term political theatre was sometimes referred to as *agitprop theatre* or simply *agitprop*. **[A common definition of “agitprop” today is: “political propaganda promulgated chiefly in literature, drama, music, or art.”]**

In later centuries, political theatre has sometimes taken a different form. Sometimes associated with cabaret and folk theatre, it has offered itself as a theatre 'of, by, and for the people'. **In this guise, political theatre has developed within the civil societies under oppressive governments as a means of actual underground communication and the spreading of critical thought...**

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_theatre

This brings to mind, for me, the passing of information about the Underground Railroad by slaves – through song, quilting, artwork and other representational means. Now, back to more recent history:

In American regional theatre...The Detroit Repertory Theatre has been among those regional theaters at the forefront of political comedy, staging plays like Jacob M. Appel's *Arborophilia*, in which **a lifelong Democrat prefers that her daughter fall in love with a poplar tree instead of a Republican activist.**

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_theatre

Locally we have an annual protest in Pasadena called The Doo Dah Parade – a critique and mockery of The Rose Parade – organized in a bar of/by/for the people. The first year it was done illegally and completely free of charge. Since then it has been coopted... but still retains some of the satire and mockery of money and power that the original parade intended.

Now, if we look at our Gospel of choice for today – Matthew – but look about 10 chapters earlier, we find Matthew 10 [NRSV]:

1 Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness...
5 These twelve **Jesus sent out with the following instructions:** ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, 6 but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 **As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.”** 8 Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. **You received without payment; give without payment.** 9 **Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, 10 no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff;** for laborers deserve their food. 11 Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. 12 **As you enter the house, greet it.** 13 If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 14 **If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.**

Jesus was giving instructions for street theatre here. He was well-aware of the Cynics and their philosophy – and one of the more colorful founders, Diogenes, 300 years earlier:

Diogenes believed that virtue was better **revealed in action** than in theory. He used his simple lifestyle and behavior to criticize the social values and institutions of what he saw as a corrupt or at least confused society. In a highly non-traditional fashion, he had a reputation of sleeping and eating wherever he chose... Diogenes made a virtue of poverty. He begged for a living and often slept in a large ceramic jar in the marketplace. **He became notorious for his**

philosophical stunts such as carrying a lamp in the daytime, claiming to be looking for an honest man.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diogenes>

Today's text in Matthew 21 is, again, describing political street theatre:

Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately."

Jesus is deliberately setting up an ancient Doo Dah Parade if you will – a counter-parade to one that is happening simultaneously on the other side of the city. Dawn Hutchings, a progressive Canadian Lutheran pastor, has done a beautiful job describing the scene:

In their book: The Last Week, Greek Testament scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, point out that the parade that heralded Jesus entry into Jerusalem wasn't the largest or most spectacular parade in town during that particular Passover season.

Back then, Jerusalem was a destination hotspot—a tourist town. The city's population swelled from 40,000 to 200,000 during the holidays and Passover was one of the busiest holidays. Crossan and Borg point out that there were two processions into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday...

...Entering Jerusalem at Passover, from the west, was the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Like the Roman governors of Judea before him, Pilate lived in Caesarea by the sea. **[Like someone we know, he] spent most of his time at his beach house.** But with crowds of devout Jews flowing into Jerusalem to commemorate their liberation from Egypt, the Roman Governors would put on a display of force, to deter the Jews from getting too exuberant about the possibility of liberation from Rome.

Pilate's procession was the visible manifestation of Imperial Roman power.

Once a year, during the Passover, the Roman procurator moved his headquarters to Jerusalem in a show of strength designed to prevent any outbreaks of insurgency or violent rebellion against Roman rule. Such outbreaks were a constant danger, both because Roman rule imposed real hardship economically on their subject nations, and because, no one likes the foot of a foreign power on their necks. In a show of military force, the second parade included, **"cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold."**

The sound of "marching feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums" would have had a sobering effect on all those who saw this parade. There would have been no shouts of Hosanna as the powerful Pilate

rode astride of his horse, hoping to strike fear into the resentful onlookers. As Pilate lead a regiment of his own most trusted soldiers into town, as a show of force, he did so with confidence knowing that he was backed up by several battalions of Rome's finest garrisoned on the west side of Jerusalem ready to flood into the city at Pilate's command.

The Gospel according to Mark, written some 50 years after the event, tells us that **Jesus' procession** into Jerusalem was not a spontaneous, slap-dash, spur-of-the-moment event. In fact, Mark, the first Gospel to be written, spends more time telling us about the preparations for Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem than about the event itself. **It would seem Jesus wanted intentionally to set himself in stark contrast with the other procession coming into town. According to Mark, the event was a sort of counter-procession, designed to contrast the kingdom of Rome to the dominion of God...**

...Jesus offers us a choice between two parades. The attraction of the power and the might of Pilate's military parade with all its glory and wonder is still there to tempt us. The temptation to use force and violence, military might, nuclear deterrence, shock and awe, is still marching its way into the hearts and minds of so many people.

<https://pastordawn.com/2013/03/18/marching-in-the-wrong-parades-a-palm-sunday-sermon/>

And there it is: we still have two parades going on in our world. There is the parade that leads to chemical weapons used on innocent people by a cruel tyrant – and missile strikes in retaliation from a narcissistic president with no comprehensive foreign policy – who criticized his predecessor for even thinking of doing the exact same thing. And there is the parade of peacemakers – those who would use diplomacy and economic pressure and global collaboration between nations to bring war criminals to justice.

As Christians, we commit ourselves to be part of the Palm Parade – not the Pilate Parade. We are involved in bringing in the Peaceable Kin-dom of G-d rather than upholding the Roman Empire. And when the democratic process has betrayed our intentions – we can, with the strength of history and religious fervor to back us, turn to art – engage in street theatre – stage protests that gain media attention and sway minds and hearts – sing and paint and write and act our way toward a society that G-d intended.

Here's to Diogenes and Jesus!

Here's to Art and Protest!

Here's to Hope and a return to Holy Sanity in the days ahead.

Matthew 21:1-11

1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." 4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 5 "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" 10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" 11 The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

DOO DAH PARADE, PASADENA, CA – CIRCA 1978



DOO DAH PARADE, PASADENA, CA – CIRCA 1979

