

“Approaching the Cross in the Unity of the Spirit”

Reading: Matthew 21:1-11; John 17:1-23

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I am not an engineer, obviously, but my understanding is that in engineering and other industries there is a saying that for any project or product or program, you can pick two out of these three options: good, fast, and cheap. Out of those three options, you can only have two at a time, so you have to decide what’s important to you. You can make a high quality product quickly, but it won’t be cheap. You can make something inexpensive and high quality, but it’s going to take more time. Or you can have something inexpensive quickly, but it won’t be very good. Good, fast, and cheap: pick two. There’s always a trade-off. There’s always a cost somewhere.

You can’t have your cake and eat it, too. There ain’t no such thing as a free lunch. Lots of ways to say the same basic truth of life that hopefully you’ve realized before now, that there’s always a cost somewhere. There are even scientific ways of saying it, quantifying that the entropy or chaos or disorder of an isolated system must always increase with time; there’s always going to be some inefficiency somewhere that leads to waste. There’s always a cost.

Where it gets dangerous is when that cost seems invisible, when it’s too slow to notice at first, or when someone else out of sight has to pay the cost. How much suffering was caused in our country and around the world ten years ago by financial speculators who wanted to make a quick million off the housing market while letting some nameless family somewhere else take all the risk? How much damage has been done by industries that don’t care if their pollution or byproducts go somewhere downstream and out of sight? How much have I cost my own character and my own soul by thinking, “I’ll just do that later?” There’s always a cost, always an investment needed, always a choice to be made. You can make it now or you can make it later, or you can push the responsibility off on someone else, but there’s always a choice to be made.

Today we come to the last part of this Farewell Discourse Jesus gives to His disciples on the night of His Last Supper with them before He is betrayed. He knows what’s coming. He knows that the world is going to lash out against Him and try to halt the arrival of His kingdom. He knows that those who have made their investment in gaining power and relying on violence are threatened by His message of loving your enemy and giving of yourself even to death. So Jesus is giving His closest disciples one more lesson on what they need to know before the confrontation comes. And as we also approach the cross, even though we’re two thousand years removed from the events we’re reading about, what does Jesus want us to know? What is He also saying to us about how we can be like Him in approaching the cross?

We’ve seen in recent weeks that He begins this entire discourse by putting into action His love and humility by taking the place of a servant. He empties Himself of what we normally think of as greatness in order to wash the feet of His disciples. And then He assures them that this is not an isolated incident; even though they’re going to betray Him and abandon Him, God will not retaliate in like manner. “Don’t let your hearts be troubled,” He tells them. God will remain present. And then He gives them what He calls a “new” command; He sums up everything He has been saying to them all along by instructing them to live in self-giving love. That love doesn’t guarantee safety, and in fact it probably means that the world will lash out at you just like it’s lashing out at Jesus, but He ends

chapter 16 right before our reading for today by saying, “take heart; I have overcome the world.” He’s saying this right before He is arrested, put on trial, and executed, and yet He knows that the kingdom of God will not be stopped.

And so He prays for His disciples. This last chapter of the Discourse is Jesus’ prayer for them and for us. It’s kind of a unique moment in the Bible, because here we get to see right into God’s heart for us. Christians believe that God has revealed Himself to us as one God who lives eternally in three persons — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this prayer we get to listen in on a conversation between the Son and the Father. We get to hear very clearly what exactly it is God wants for us. Prayer reveals an awful lot about a person’s priorities. Some people pray because they think that’s what they’re supposed to do in order to stay on God’s good side, so for them prayer reveals a heart motivated by obligation and a desire to keep their bases covered. Some people pray in a moment of crisis, so their prayer reveals a heart motivated by fear for safety of one’s self or others. Hopefully we’re growing in our prayers so that they are times of communion with God, listening for what God has for us and taking the time to pray deeply for the needs of ourselves and others. That sort of prayer reveals a heart genuinely desiring to know God and God’s best.

So what does Jesus’ prayer here reveal about the heart of God and the priorities God has for us? Jesus prays that His Father would keep us, protect us, hold us fast in His name. He’s not praying that we would never face struggle or challenge, but that we would be protected from challenges that would overcome us. He prays for protection from the evil one, and again, the assumption is not that everything is going to be a cake walk for us, but that we live in a war zone and God would be our armor in the midst of battle. He prays that God would sanctify us by the truth that is God’s word, that we would be transformed and made holy by the truth of Jesus’ message of God’s love for us and the world. He prays not only for the disciples who were there with Him that night, but also for us today and for all Christians in all generations. The assumption is that the disciples of Jesus will go on to make more disciples of Jesus. The church continues to carry on the mission they began, or else it isn’t the church; the assumption is that Jesus is sending them and us. And maybe the most important message in this prayer is that as we go about our mission we would be one as Jesus and His Father are one — that we would live in the love and unity that God enjoys between the persons of the Trinity! The way we treat one another and the unity we share with one another in the name of Jesus is itself a proclamation to the world of who God is. When those who claim to be Christians are in conflict with one another or in disunity with God, it damages our witness of God’s work.

This is not a prayer of arrival, this is a prayer of sending. In other words, when Jesus says, “Take heart! I have overcome the world,” He’s not saying that the battle is over and we can sit back and enjoy retirement in the kingdom of God, He’s saying that the outcome of the battle has been decided by God’s faithful power and it’s therefore our task to announce the reality of that power in spite of the world’s blindness. It’s enlightening to pay attention not only to what Jesus *does* pray for us, but also for what He *does not* pray for us. He explicitly does not pray that God the Father would take us out of the world or that God would remove us completely from temptation by the evil one or that we would be immune to the attacks of the hostile world. It is not God’s will that we would simply eject out of danger by going to heaven or cloistering away from the world. On the contrary, it is God’s will that we face the difficult task of faithful witness to the truth of His word by showing love to one another and the world. It is God’s will for us that we do so in unity, showing that the presence of

God's Spirit among us binds us together in a deeper and more real way than anything else that could divide us.

The heart of God for us is *good*, but it is not necessarily *easy*. There's always a choice to be made in life, and that's what Jesus is offering us here. In designing a product you can choose two of the three options of good, fast, and cheap. In choosing a path for the character of your soul, you can choose between good and easy. The good choice is rarely the easiest choice, and the easy choice is rarely the best choice. It would be easier if Jesus just yanked us up to heaven the moment we chose to follow Him, but then we could not give hope to the hurting around us when we demonstrated that suffering does not mean defeat, and that God is able to bring redemption out of the darkness. It would be easier if Jesus simply removed all evil and challenge and temptation from our lives, but then we would have no reason to put down deep roots, we would have no stories of victory and God's power in our lives, and we would have no need to trust in God's promises. It would be easier if Jesus simply prayed that all of our problems would go away, but then we would have no connection to the reality of the lives of people around us. God's heart for us may not always be easy, but it is good, and we have the choice in our lives to choose which one of those is our priority.

Because that's the choice that lies at the heart of the story of Palm Sunday: good or easy? Jesus entered Jerusalem to such acclaim and expectation. People greeted Him as though He were a victorious King, and it seemed as though everyone was willing to jump on the bandwagon of excitement about this potential Messiah. We can't know what all of those people in the crowds were thinking on that day, but it seems pretty clear that not all of them were willing to follow Jesus to the cross, and maybe even some of them were in the crowds a few days later shouting for His crucifixion. He didn't meet their expectations because He chose the path of the cross rather than the path of the sword, the path of love and humility rather than the path of forcing others to His will. He chose the good path rather than the easy path, and not many people followed Him.

The world continually lies to us and promises us that good can be easy, and all it takes is selling your soul. Just numb yourself through entertainment or drugs or pleasure, and you'll be much happier than if you pursue a life of meaning in Christ. Just buy the latest and greatest, and it will solve all your problems, even though the last thousand times you fell for this it didn't work. This time you're justified in taking the easy way, this time it's okay, this time won't hurt anything. But that's rarely the good choice. The world affirms our desire to have the excitement of the palms on Palm Sunday without it necessarily leading to the cross of Good Friday, but Jesus prays for us to remember that there is no hope of resurrection without crucifixion. There is no hope of redemption without sacrifice, no hope of love without humility. There is no hope of goodness in the easy way.

You're driving along route 940 tomorrow, and you get stuck at the traffic light where they're working on the bridge. The vehicle in front of you has out-of-state plates and the driver somehow missed the sign showing you where you need to stop in order for the sensor to register that you're there, and you sit and you wait and you wait for the light to turn green. Easy way or good way? Do you lay on your horn and curse your neighbor and pull up right behind them to crowd them forward, and take the damage to your soul that inflicts? Do you take the easy way that might come so naturally, or do you find a good way?

That seems too frivolous, but the easy way so often leaves a mark on our souls, however small. You're in a conversation with a friend, and some words come out of your mouth that aren't kind or humble, and you have to choose the easy way or the good way: let those words stay there with a bit of a laugh to soften them, or confess the wrong. You have a co-worker or a family member or a neighbor who hurts you deeply through their words and actions, and you have to choose the good way or the easy way. Do you forgive and hope and work for reconciliation if possible, or sulk and lash back? Jesus prays for us to remain in the world to reveal the truth of God's promises to those who do not yet believe.

There is good news about choosing the good path, rather than the easy path. As Wesleyans we have deep in our identity the affirmation that God can actually transform us inside and out through the miraculous working of His grace. In other words, it's true that what is good is rarely easy, but it's also true that what is good in our lives can become easier with God's help and our faithful response to His help. In His prayer Jesus says that He gives us His word and His glory; He receives from the Father and passes it on to us. So the word of God is never intended to be burdensome for us; it is always intended to bring freedom with God's help. God can and will work within you to make what is good easier.

We are nearing the end of our Lenten journey, and the cross looms large in this Holy Week. The time of decision is upon us: will we choose what is good, or what is easy? Will we cling to unity in Christ, respond to God's call of holiness, be His witnesses in the world, and walk the path of the cross? Or will we take the easy way instead?



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