

“Barabbas – A Place for the Loser”

April 5, 2020

A Place at the Table series – Palm Sunday – Livestream

So we're on the brink of what we call “Holy Week” – this time between Palm Sunday and Easter. It's meant to be a time to focus on God's work in Jesus' life and ministry – and even in his death. It's the most solemn time in the Christian year – a time when we know what to expect, and yet we're still here with all of the emotions that this week brings.

We started this morning with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. The king of Kings riding in on a donkey – a mark of humility Matthew notes. The donkey was also a symbol of Jesus coming in peace – not to make war or proclaim victory with military power.

But he comes to the shouts of “Hosanna!” And if you don't remember what “Hosanna!” means, it's literally a cry that says, “Save us now!” It is urgent. It is pleading. And it's the call of people who are hoping that this man – Jesus of Nazareth – will save them from all that's wrong. He is Messiah – the One they'd waited for who would take care of all that was going wrong.

And I'll admit. That's a plea I have as I come today. Jesus, save us now! Jesus, fix this mess, and help us! The Gospel story mirrors some of what we're feeling in these days – moments of great joy and blessing (it's so good to be together even connecting online), times of deep despair (so much sadness and tragedy) coupled with times of resolve (we will get through this!), followed by anguish (why is this happening?), and throw in some hope (signs of new life, improvement, solidarity, community).

And maybe this title seems strange. We're not supposed to use the term “loser” to describe anyone. It's not nice. But today I hope we hear it in the spirit of those who were around Jesus who felt like they had lost. I hope we hear it for Barabbas, too – not because he was a criminal or simply because he was notorious as Matthew says. (Mark and Luke say that Barabbas committed murder during the insurrection against the Romans, and he may have even been a freedom fighter in the Jewish resistance trying to defeat the Romans with force.)

Barabbas may have been popular, but he put his trust in the things that couldn't really save for the long term – power, might, violent revolution. He put his hope in the wrong way of bringing freedom. That wouldn't win. Barabbas was misguided and mistaken.

Jesus was popular, too, so much that he was a threat to the religious authorities. But he had a very different spirit from someone like Barabbas. He preached peace and taught about loving our enemies, and even when Pilate asked him to explain himself, he didn't say much at all. *He never said a mumbalin' word*, the song says.

He didn't defend himself, though he certainly hadn't done anything close to what Barabbas had done. Frederick Buechner writes, “Pilate told the people that they could

choose to spare the life of either a murderer named Barabbas or Jesus of Nazareth, and they chose Barabbas. Given the same choice, Jesus, of course, would have chosen to spare Barabbas, too.” Jesus gave himself up for Barabbas; it started there. Jesus made a way to freedom for Barabbas and for us.

Jesus says that the power of love wins in the end. And, yes, we know the end, but it’s not without a really important middle part. Every year, we’re tempted to shout “Hosanna!” with the crowds with great hope in Jesus and then skip a few pages and shout “He is risen!” But if we do, we’ll miss the part that we really need to hear.

The people in the crowd in Jerusalem wanted a savior, and their hope was for someone who would save them from corrupt religious leaders, the oppression of the Roman Empire, and the harsh reality of the rich who took advantage of the poor. They thought Jesus was a winner – a sure winner who would save them and make it better right now. He would take care of this and make things better.

But Jesus didn’t do anything of those things. His salvation wasn’t just about this world and their situation – at least not how they hoped and expected. He turned out to be a loser, too – at least that’s what they thought – and they bailed on him. He didn’t deliver on what they wanted, but he absolutely delivered on God’s promises.

His salvation is rooted in the power of love to overcome our love of power. His love fights hatred and despair. He shows the truth that perfect love that casts out fear. His love shows that death isn’t the end. He shows what it means to love sacrificially.

And we don’t have to look far for examples that show us the same spirit of sacrificial love. We live in community with people who are making sacrifices every day as they work in their chosen fields whether it’s healthcare, grocery stores, manufacturing, public service, and more. We hear stories of people giving up ventilators so that someone else can use it to breathe or feeding people who are hungry. We see people serve one another in love by staying home and keeping our distance because we want to care for each other.

But what might it have been like for Barabbas? How might he have reacted to the news that he was saved from death – and instead this other Jesus took his place? I invite us to consider that and see this interpretation of how Barabbas might have responded.

SHOW MEDIA – *They’re crucifying the man who took your place.*

Though we don’t talk about him much, Barabbas is really all of us – each of us. He is literally saved by Jesus. And I wonder if he was in the crowd as Jesus made his way to the cross. I wonder if he stayed or ran away. I wonder what happened to him. What did he do with his second chance – his gift of grace – his freedom from death?

And the same question comes to us as we walk through this week. It will feel different to worship at home. It will feel different to celebrate Holy Thursday and Good Friday without being gathered in-person. But it may just be more like what Jesus and his disciples experienced than ever before. I hope we’ll take the time to read through one of the Gospels – pick one: Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John – and read the whole thing.

We've been talking about a place at the table. There's a place for the loser – the one who puts their hope in the wrong thing or the wrong person or the wrong path. There's a place for someone who has made mistakes and missteps. Jesus shows us a love that is so deep and wide and true that there's no denying it's from another realm. It's not centered in our humanity, but grounded in God's holiness and grace. We trust in that love as we walk with him in these days. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRAYER SONG – O Lord, Hear My Prayer

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE & THE LORD'S PRAYER

Lord, in your mercy...hear our prayer...