



Business as Usual, or Not?

TEXT
John 12:19–33

March 25, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This is the week that defines the truth of the world. This is the week when we remember what God did to reveal his ways most clearly in this world. It is a way of redemption, a way of facing that which is wrong and has gone wrong, and not letting the wrong define us.

And it all started with a parade. It was a parade of hope. Most parades are — unless the parade is just for entertainment. They throw beads and stuff at those entertainment parades. But if the parade is about truth, if it is a parade about our lives together, then parades tend to be about hope. Of course, if it is about hope, it is also a parade of threat because no matter what change is desired, there are also folks who don't want the change.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Men cut palm branches and threw them on the ground before him, as if creating a carpet for their new king to traverse.

Women sang songs of liberation and redemption. *Hosanna in the highest ... our Savior has come.* They held their small children up on their shoulders so that they could see Jesus as

he rode by. They looked deep into the eyes of their older children and exhorted them, "Remember this day. This is the day when things began to get better."

Their hope was palpable. The disciples were surprised to see that they weren't alone, but crowds had gathered. It gave them hope. You could hear hope in their song. You could feel it in the air.

But there were those who didn't want what Jesus was teaching; they didn't want what he was about.

His ways with wealth and poverty were a threat.

His way with people on the margins — women and slaves and even unrighteous folks, felons and immigrants — it was a threat. Even his ways with the practice of religion. He thought how we treated each other mattered more than how we observed certain rituals. It was unsettling.

So, of course, he was a concern to folks. They worried about his popularity. The parade alarmed them. They said that the world has gone after him.

There were parades and marches all across the country yesterday. This time it was in response to the cycle of gun

violence that just continues day after day in this country. The students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School have inspired folks from all over. I know some of you attended the march and rally here in Kansas City yesterday.

People gathered who are weary of being a nation awash in gun violence. Young people, students even, seem somewhat stunned that we, their parents, haven't been smart enough to figure out what to do about this. Or we haven't cared enough to figure out what to do about this. Because whenever there is a change desired, there are always those who oppose the change.

These young people don't believe that school children should be expected to pay the price for our freedom to own a gun. They are questioning the wisdom where not everyone is guaranteed access to a job, and not everyone is guaranteed access to a home, and not everyone can have access to a doctor; for those things you need to show some responsibility, but everyone has access to a gun. No responsibilities are required. It's just a right.

And all our conversation and prayers and politics about

rights and responsibilities, about freedoms and the Constitution, have left us unable or unwilling to do anything about it — when time and again, innocent citizens, too often children, are murdered. So they marched.

There is a restlessness in our union, a public wondering if we can be better. It is political, it is practical, and it is theological. If people are dying, it is always theological.

That was the case on this first Palm Sunday. There was a restlessness in the empire. So, people gathered for the parade. They gathered in hope. But the challenge is that whenever people parade in hope, there will be those who see the same parade as a threat.

They said, “Look, the world has gone after him.” So they moved to do what they already knew they would do; they moved to do what they had to do; they moved to do what the situation required of them: They had him crucified.

Jesus knew it would happen. He said he would be crucified. It wasn’t hard to predict because the Romans did not invent the cross for Jesus, you know. It was common. Crucifixion happened all the time.¹ Conquered peoples would be crucified, left for others to watch as a warning not to mess with this empire. Criminals could be crucified, as a deterrent: Don’t try this at home, or you might end up like this. Those deemed unrighteous could be crucified for almost no reason at all. Crucifixion,

like an ancient form of lynching, was used to instill terror in the people.

Crucifixion was brutal and common. It was business as usual. Power does what power is able to do and can get away with — to maintain things so that parades stay just that, a parade and not a change.

This is an old lesson in civilization: When there is a threat, first define the other as less than you, then you can destroy the other. That is the story of history. That’s business as usual.

Crucifixion existed to keep hope submissive to order — except in those few instances when those on the bottom fight back and there is a protest, maybe even an insurrection, a revolution.

But the story of Jesus is different. He did not seek to destroy those who would destroy him; he sought to redeem them. Let them do the “civilized thing” and crucify him. But by the power of God, he revealed how empty and small and powerless and afraid these men of power are. He did not come to destroy the destroyers, but to redeem them, in the hope that “the children might grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed.”²

Redemption is a powerful love, a real love, a political love, and it is a love that is hard to trust because it is a costly love.

The Pharisees were worried. They said, “The world has gone after him.” Not really. The world has never gone af-

ter him. The truth be told, the church struggles to go after him. Don’t you feel that way? I feel that all the time; that the way of Jesus is so far ahead of me, I’m struggling to keep up with him.

We know it from our own history. The church has been on the wrong side of so many things.

We were on the wrong side of the oppression of Native Americans, marching them west, all the while proclaiming from pulpits that God had given this land to us because someone needed to show the world how to be Christian. We failed to see the irony in that.

We were on the wrong side of slavery — proudly pointing out that there were slaves in the Bible, so if they were in the Book, they could be in our civilization.

We used the same Bible to keep women in their place, so it was said.

The church has kept quiet about the abuse of children, or the evils of poverty, time and again keeping hope submissive to the status quo.

They worried that the world had gone after him, but I’m sure Jesus would be delighted if the church would just go after him.

I’m not pointing fingers at anyone, for I am no better. I see it all the time; I am struggling to keep up with Jesus and worried that his parade has left me behind — which is why we all need to remember this parade. Because this day is not about the world going after Jesus;

it's about Jesus going after the world.

He said he came because God so loved the world. He said he was the light of the world. He came as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world.

The world has gone after him? No, not yet. But he rode that donkey and showed us that he is our king — with the hope that we might keep trying and someday get it right. Maybe we can go after him, if we trust that he is already and always coming after us.

I scanned the news yesterday. I heard the familiar voice of Congressman John Lewis. He was encouraging young people to stay involved in the ways of our nation. I thought again of the difference he and others like him made when they were not much older than these high school students who marched yesterday.

John Lewis, as you well know, was beaten senseless on the Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, in March 1965. I heard him tell a story here in Kansas City a bit over a year ago.

A half century after that evil Sunday in Selma, John Lewis said a man came to his congressional office in Washington. He told John Lewis that he had been one of the officers that day in 1965 who had beaten him.

Lewis said tears were in his eyes. "I was blinded by hatred and I was wrong. I am so sorry. I was wrong."

Lewis said, "I forgive you." And then he said, "I continue

to believe that it is possible for us to get it right."

They worried that the world had gone after him. But they got it completely backwards. This parade did not take place because the world is going after Jesus; this parade took place because Jesus is coming after the world. And the hope that lives in this parade is less the hope that the people bring, but what we see most clearly is the hope that Jesus has. He rides into Jerusalem on this Palm Sunday because he continues to believe that it is possible for us to get it right. So we try, and we seek to follow after him — if not for ourselves, then maybe for our children, in the hope that they will someday grow to be "neither the destroyers nor the destroyed."

But this is certain: This week reveals that the love of God will never stop going after the world. That is business as usual for God.

¹The information on crucifixion is recorded in the article "Crucifixion," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992)

²This phrase is taken from Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams* (1990), p. 299

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.