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The Most Fascinating Story within the Story of Palm Sunday Matthew 21:1-17

Matthew 21 tells a rather dramatic, often intense, remarkably tender, and yet in places even violent story about who Jesus is. It provides us with a window into the soul of our Savior.

The journey from Jericho to Jerusalem was approximately 17 miles, nothing by today's standards but quite a trip when you had to make it on foot. On the way Jesus and his disciples passed through Bethany and the tiny village of Bethphage (lit., "house of figs"). According Matthew 21:1, they crossed over the Mount of Olives which was located due east of Jerusalem.

At that moment Jesus dispatched two of his disciples into the village. Their task is clearly defined in vv. 2-3. In case you're wondering, the mother donkey was probably brought along in order to induce her offspring to cooperate.

We don't know how Jesus knew there would be a donkey and her colt at that precise time and place. In all likelihood the Spirit had revealed to Jesus the presence of these animals.

In Mark 11:2 we are told that they were to secure a colt "on which no one has ever sat." Why? We know that in the OT the red heifer that was used in ceremonial cleansings had to be a beast "on which a yoke has never come" (Num. 19:2). We also know that the cart on which the ark of the covenant was carried had to be one which had never before been used for any purpose (1 Sam. 6:7). The point is simply that this is a way of drawing attention to the special and momentous occasion that was about to occur.

But why all the fanfare about a donkey? After all, it wasn't customary for pilgrims to enter Jerusalem for the Passover riding a donkey or any other animal. The final stage of the journey was always completed on foot. And if he was insistent on riding, why not on a white stallion or in a royal chariot, either of which would be more fitting for a king than riding on a donkey!

The answer is found in vv. 4-7. There Matthew alludes to a famous prophecy found in Zechariah 9:9 – "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

By securing a donkey and making his entry into Jerusalem in this altogether unconventional way ***Jesus is claiming as clearly and boldly as he can to be Israel's Messiah***, the promised one, the savior from sin, the ruling King, the sacrificial Lamb of God ***whose blood will accomplish once and for all what the blood of hundreds of thousands of sheep and goats could never accomplish in the centuries preceding***. Jesus is saying, in no uncertain terms, "You know the one of whom Zechariah spoke in 9:9 of his prophecy? I am He!"

The Messiah was to come riding a donkey because it was a sign of peace. To come on a horse would have signaled a declaration of war, a man seeking a military triumph. But Jesus is the Prince of Peace. ***He came not to wage war but to end it. He came not to alienate but to reconcile. He came not to condemn but to heal and save. He came not in self-serving pride and pretense, but in humility and lowliness.***

The word "***Hosanna***" was a cry for help, asking that God "save us now, we pray" or something similar. It was also a word that the people of Israel would use as an acclamation of praise, shouting their worship unto the Lord.

I want to bring to your attention something Luke includes in his account that Matthew omits. Luke tells us that when the people shouted "Hosanna" the religious leaders called on Jesus to rebuke them, to which Jesus replied: "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out" (Luke 19:39-40). It's as if Jesus is saying:

“If those who were created in God’s image and for whom I will give my life on the cross refuse to praise me, then these inanimate rocks will do so. If you will not do what should be natural to you, the stones will have to do what is unnatural to them.”

Have the rocks ever had to cry out because you refused to do so? Have you ever been so insensitive or so proud that you compelled the Lord to resort to Plan B, utilizing the natural creation to obtain the praise and honor due his name?

Allow me to set the stage for what we are about to witness when Jesus enters the Temple complex.

During Passover the population of Jerusalem swelled to 10x its normal size; thousands in and around the Temple complex gathered to pray, to offer their sacrifices, to perform ceremonial cleansings, rituals of purification, paying their tithes, and no doubt watching and wondering what would come next.

Jesus would have been deeply pained by what he saw. What a sorry spectacle. It sickened him. Instead of a quiet courtyard where people could pray and praise, there was a noisy trading center, a *veritable religious flea market!* Instead of the dignity and reverence of a prayer meeting, there was the sound of cattle and the bleating of sheep. Instead of songs of praise and adoration, there is noisy, even angry commerce.

All pilgrims were required to bring a sacrifice. If you were too poor to afford one, the Law of Moses provided an alternative (Lev. 5:7,11). Each animal had to undergo a rigorous inspection for defects and deformities. Even the slightest physical flaw would force you to purchase one of the animals from the merchants at an inflated price.

On the Mount of Olives there were four markets for selling animals. In a.d. 66, Josephus tells us that more than 250,000 lambs were required for Passover! A quarter of a million! The going price was outrageous. This was price gouging at its worst. Two pigeons that normally sell for 25 cents might now sell for as much as \$4.00.

Many people from places such as Persia, Syria, and Egypt would have brought foreign currency with them. The “money-changers” referred to in v. 12 were there to exchange it into Jewish coins for use in the Temple . . . for an outrageous fee, of course!

Every male Israelite between 20 and 50 years of age had to pay a Temple tax, but only in Tyrian coinage because of its high silver content. So another exchange was required, and another fee had to be paid. There was extortion, bribery, theft, dishonesty, and greed everywhere . . . all in a place designed for prayer and praise.

Finally, Jesus had seen and heard enough. So here, in prime time, so to speak, with maximum exposure, he goes into action.

It must have been an incredibly violent outburst. Rage, anger, and indignation drove him. He got physical. According to v. 12 he “drove out” the merchants. The word is the same used often of exorcising or expelling demons. Jesus suddenly becomes a bouncer! He grabbed them by the scruff of the neck, kicked them in the seat of their pants, overturns their tables, and knocked them from their perches.

When the time for his crucifixion comes, he will permit them to lay hands on him and carry him off. But not now! They are frozen, powerless, in awe, stunned and fearful! Jesus made an absolute shambles of their religious bazaar. The disarray and confusion must have been something to see: animals running everywhere, doves flying to freedom. But no one could so much as lift a finger to protest his actions.

Let me make just a few observations about the meaning of this event.

First, although traditionally this has been called the “cleansing” of the Temple, it is perhaps better to see it as a *judgment*. This is a small expression of the wrath of God against a people who had turned from worship of the one true God to selling religion for a profit. There can be no doubt but that what Jesus did in 30 a.d. was an act of prophetic symbolism. This was a preview of coming attractions. That is to say, what we see here was a foreshadowing of what would happen 40 years later in 70 a.d. when the Roman army under Titus would lay siege to Jerusalem and utterly destroy both city and Temple.

Second, needless to say, this story tells us a lot about God's attitude toward commercialized religion. By this I mean using spiritual things and activities to make a personal profit unrelated to ministry or the needs of God's people. We see this all too often today where a TV evangelist will happily send you a vile of miracle spring water for a gift of \$500 together with the promise that it will secure for you the miracle you need. Or others who insist that if you will but sow your seed of faith in the form of a \$1,000 gift to this ministry you will be healed.

Third, it's important for us to remember that Jesus not only cleanses the Temple, he not only judges the Temple, **he replaces the Temple!** In John 2:18-22 there was an exchange of words between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in which our Lord made it plain that the place of God's dwelling is the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true Temple of God. He is the center and focus of all worship! And as both Paul and Peter will later tell us in their letters, we, the Church, because we are the body of Christ, we are the Temple of God in whom the Holy Spirit now dwells. We, in fact, are the only Temple in which God will ever choose to dwell again!

Fourth, and finally, let us look closely at **what this story tells us about Jesus**. We first see him riding into the city on a donkey, a sign of his humility, his lowliness, his gentleness. But this Jesus is also capable of holy indignation, of righteous rage directed angrily at all that defiles the sacred place of worship. If that were not enough, we then read something here in Matthew 21 that is almost too shocking to believe. It seems at first glance to be so out of place, so inconsistent with what we've been reading. It is nothing short of breathtaking:

"And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them" (Matt. 21:14).

Think about what is happening. Try to get a grip on what the people would have witnessed. Here we see **the anger and righteous indignation of Jesus vented at full throttle**. His rage at the self-serving hypocrisy of those who should have been helping the people finds expression in an unprecedented physical outburst by our Lord.

This is the last place one would expect to see tenderness and love. This is hardly the time, or so it would seem, to display kindness towards those in need. This is hardly the context or atmosphere in which one would expect to see compassion or mercy. Indeed, it is difficult for us to understand how anyone can consistently be both enraged and compassionate at the same time.

We are prone to give expression to one of these passions to the exclusion of the other. We can't sustain in our hearts both at the same time. They cancel each other out. Were we to experience both simultaneously, we would probably feel like hypocrites!

But not Jesus! Hold your breath and observe what happens next: "**And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them**" (v. 14). You could probably still hear the echoes of our Lord's angry voice bouncing off the walls of the Temple! The men selling animals for sacrifice were running for their lives. It was obvious to them that Jesus was not someone to be trifled with at this time. Whatever else they may have thought of Jesus, this was no time to stand toe to toe with him.

It's nothing short of breathtaking when you remember that earlier in the gospel of Matthew Jesus had called people to himself based on the fact that he was "gentle" and "lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:28-30). Is this the same Jesus? Has he suffered a mental or emotional breakdown? We hear often of people who suffer from a stroke or some great emotional trauma and experience a profound transformation in their personality. They turn from their normal ways as kind and patient to someone who is mean and demanding.

So how do we account for this stunning turn in temperament? Jesus has just wreaked havoc in the Temple like the proverbial bull in a china shop! He overturns tables and the coins are probably still rolling down the hallways. Yet, without missing a beat, without so much as a deep breath to regain his composure, he turns his attention to the blind and the lame and in tenderness and compassion and love and gentleness he heals them all!

So, who is this Jesus? Is he still the humble servant, riding on a donkey, offering himself to Israel as their Messianic King and savior from sin? Is he still the holy judge who is enraged with the unrighteous ways of the religious leaders? Is he at the same time the Good Shepherd of the sheep, tender and meek? **At one moment his eyes flashed like fire! No one dared make eye contact with him. A split second later his eyes are filled with tears of love and compassion.**

How would you have handled the situation? If I were Jesus I think I would have said to the sick and disabled, “I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to come back later. I’m a little out of sorts right now. I need some time to catch my breath and bring my temper under control. *I’m in no mood* to deal with your needs right now. Please speak to my secretary and set up an appointment for next week!” NO!

Was there a transformation in Christ’s character? Did he experience regret and thus repent for getting so angry and suddenly say to himself, “Oh, my, that was out of character. I’ve got to do something nice after having been so mean”? NO!

Our Lord is at one and the same time holy and loving; at one and the same time both just and kind; at one and the same time both powerful and tender; at one and the same time both enraged and brokenhearted; at one and the same time both filled with wrath and love; at one and the same time both authoritative and humble; at one and the same time both the Lion of Judah and the Lamb that was slain. And he does it without the slightest tinge of inconsistency or hypocrisy or psychological imbalance.

Contrary to what we might otherwise have thought, the anger doesn’t quench the Spirit by whom he healed the sick! In other words, the Holy Spirit through whom Jesus performed all his healing miracles is not grieved by the sudden and violent outburst that led to the routing of the religious leaders.

Jesus cares compassionately for those who are no more than a meddling inconvenience to others. These broken, crippled, handicapped folk must have been hanging around the temple for years, perhaps begging as did the man born lame in Acts 3. Nobody paid them any attention. They were, at best, an eyesore, an embarrassment to the religious establishment. But not to Jesus!

Think about these poor sickly folk for a moment. Why weren’t they frightened? The Jewish leaders certainly were. Why weren’t they offended? Why didn’t they run away? They had just witnessed a remarkable outburst of anger and righteous rage. Why didn’t they say: “I don’t want to be anywhere near that man. He’s as likely to hit me as to heal me. He seems to me to be devoid of love and tenderness.”

The answer is that they saw, or in the case of the blind sensed in their hearts, that ***this man who hated sin loved sinners***. They sensed that this man who brought judgment on the unrepentant and the prideful also showered love and mercy on the broken, the contrite, the lowly, and the needy.

This is the beauty of Jesus. This is the reason he is so worthy of our praise. Jesus is not schizophrenic. He is the perfect embodiment of precisely what we should be by the grace of God: both angry over unrighteousness and loving toward the broken; both intolerant of unrepentant religiosity and patient and longsuffering toward those who sincerely seek him for help and mercy.

Before I conclude, let me make one more observation that reveals yet again the hardness of the human heart in sin and the spiritual blindness of those who hate Jesus. We are told in v. 15 that the religious leaders “saw the wonderful things that he did.” They didn’t hear about this second-hand. They didn’t read about it in the newspaper or on a blogpost. They stood in the presence of Jesus and watched with eyes wide open as he opened wide eyes that once couldn’t see. They stood on their own two feet in the presence of Jesus who healed those who had never before been able to stand on their own two feet. And their response? “They were ***indignant!***” (v. 15b).

I pray for God to heal the sick, to cure the lame, to grant sight to the blind. In doing so they are blessed and God is magnified. But don’t ever think that this alone will turn unbelieving hearts to faith. Sometimes God uses miracles to pave the way for the work of his Spirit in regenerating human hearts. But aside from the Spirit granting spiritual eyes to behold the beauty of Jesus, unbelievers will continue to respond with indignation.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by making application of this remarkable story to our lives and our approach to healing the sick.

If ever there appeared to be an ***inopportune*** or ***inconvenient*** moment for healing the sick, this was it. Who would ever have paused to pray for the sick in the wake of what just happened in the temple?

Sadly, we tend to think that God will only heal if we create an atmosphere conducive to it and minister to people in the proper place and at the proper time. For example, we mistakenly believe that God is more likely to heal . . .

- if we turn down the lights a bit;
- if we play the right kind of music;
- if we pray for people in an appropriate context or place;
- if we make sure that the mood of the moment is calm and peaceful;
- if we pray for people at the right time, when the right people are present; etc.

Was there ever a more seemingly inappropriate or awkward moment for Jesus to heal than this one, in the temple, in the wake of an angry confrontation with the religious leaders? Why didn't Jesus say to them: "Hey folks, I know you're hurting, but I can't help you right now. I'm just not in the mood. There's too much noise in this place. There are too many people surrounding us who think I'm nuts and would just as soon that I die. I can't focus in the midst of such chaos and opposition."

No. *Jesus didn't believe in inappropriate places or unapproachable people or inconvenient times.* So why do we? Why do we not pray for the sick in the check-out line at the grocery store? Why do we not pray for our server in the restaurant? Why do we not pray for the sick at work, in the office? Why do we not pray for our neighbors while standing with them in our front yards?

I'm not saying that it is wrong to utilize background music when you pray for the sick or that it is wrong to create an atmosphere in which they are enabled to focus in an undistracted way on God. I'm simply saying that it isn't necessary, and that we should never use the awkwardness of place or time to justify refusing to pray for healing.

Today I'm simply asking you to take your cues from your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Learn from his example. And wherever there are sick people, blind people, lame people, afflicted people, and no matter what you may be feeling in the moment, pray for God to heal them.