

Message for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B (3/21/2021)
John 12:20-33

The next time you hear someone lament the divisiveness of our political climate, remind them of the last week of Jesus' life.

Our Gospel from John today takes place immediately following Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, although not everyone is feeling triumphant about it. Already a chapter earlier, the religious authorities have assembled to discuss the problem Jesus presents: "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." Power mixed with fear is a lethal cocktail, and from that moment on, the authorities conspire to kill Jesus. "It is better to have one man die for the people," the high priest reasons with the council, "than to have the whole nation destroyed."¹

But as it turns out, it's not a question of just one man's life. The authorities are prepared to neutralize other threats, too: "When the great crowd of the Jews learned that [Jesus] was [in Bethany], they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many... were believing in Jesus."²

¹ 11:47-53.

² 12:9-11.

Why is it, do you think, that authorities are so willing to murder their own constituents? What motivates them to crack down so violently on popular movements?

The issue here, as in so many other cases, is abusive power. It's a predictable pattern: a new idea sparks controversy, inspiring both enthusiastic support and fierce resistance, and the persons at the center of the controversy become either heroes or villains, depending on one's perspective. Camps form in opposition to one another, with the dominant camp exercising power, often violently, to protect its interests. The instances abound: colonialism and movements for national independence, racial oppression and the struggle for freedom, patriarchy and women's rights, capital and organized labor, economic expansionism and ecological justice, and in today's Gospel, the Roman empire (together with local elites who have little choice but to collaborate with Rome) and the reign of God.

Important ideas and the movements they instigate are inevitably divisive, but division in and of itself is not the problem. Conflict makes us uncomfortable, so we tend to decry so-called "divisiveness" rather than confront the underlying circumstances that cause division in the first place.

To quote The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we're often "more devoted to 'order' than to justice"; we prefer "a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice."³

³ "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," *A Testament of Hope*, ed. James M. Washington, 295.

Of course, **the pursuit of justice requires that we occupy a position, that we speak up for something.** But, so many calls for “unity” or “reconciliation” assume that moral moderation is somehow more virtuous.

Tayari Jones remarks:

People ask how might we “meet in the middle,” as though this represents a safe, neutral and civilized space.... [But] buried in this is a false equivalency of ideas, what you might call the “good people on both sides” phenomenon. When we revisit our shameful past, ask yourself, Where was the middle? Rather than chattel slavery, perhaps we could agree on a nice program of indentured servitude? Instead of subjecting Japanese-American citizens to indefinite detention during WW II, what if we had agreed to give them actual sentences and perhaps provided a receipt for them to reclaim their things when they were released? What is halfway between moral and immoral?⁴

If we’re more concerned with division than we are with what’s right and good, then we’re complicit in perpetuating intolerable conditions of life for so many of our neighbors.

Jesus can’t help but speak up for the reign of God; he can’t help but advocate mutual attentiveness⁵ and sacrificial love⁶ over against exploitation and violence. And for that reason, responses to him are intensely polarized; some flock to hear him while others plot to destroy him.⁷

And, **although Jesus knows all too well that death awaits him, he also trusts that his death will fulfill a vital purpose:** “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much

⁴ “There’s Nothing Virtuous About Finding Common Ground,” time.com/5434381/tayari-jones-moral-middle-myth/.

⁵ John 13:14, 34.

⁶ John 15:12-13.

⁷ Margaret A. Farley, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 140.

fruit.” **The fruit of Jesus’ death will be the community of those who take up a cruciform way of life in his name and in defiance of abusive power.**⁸ “Now the ruler of this world will be driven out,” Jesus insists, cast out like an evil spirit. “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth,” that is, lifted up on the cross, “will draw all people to myself.”

Jesus’ crucifixion is “the judgment of this world,” exposing and delegitimizing abusive power in favor of another way.⁹ From the cross, God’s love pours out to nurture the growth of new life, abundant life that progressively breaks free from the constraints that the rulers of this world impose. So, take hold of that life, friends, for your own sake and for the sake of all your neighbors, that it might be our salvation.

⁸ See Gail R. O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, 714.

⁹ See Gil Bailie as cited by Charles L. Campbell, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 145.