

Sermon 3-26-23
Paul Purdue preaching

It is possible that I am about to preach the most boring sermon you've ever heard. If you have been reading through Matthew with us, I imagine you have seen themes emerging. There are many themes in Matthew. Today, I'm going to walk us through one theme: Jesus' conflict with church and community leaders, a conflict that runs through the last 19 chapters of Matthew and culminates in the cross. Maybe you, like me, grew up inside a personal faith bubble and did not think about how deeply Jesus challenged systemic evils?

During Holy Week, focussed on individuals, we blamed Peter for breaking his promise, Judas for his kiss, and Pilate for his handwashing. Matthew tells us that Jesus was convicted of blasphemy, a theological crime, in an after hours church trial filled with prosecutorial misconduct and false testimony. The church leaders huddled up and changed their charge to treason when they dragged Jesus to the imperial courts of Pontius Pilate. Matthew tells us Judas repented and tried to return the 30 pieces of silver, but those charged with making atonement sanctimoniously refused to take back the 'blood money' that they had paid Judas to betray Jesus. If we walk through Lent only focused on personal faith, we may miss the depths of Jesus' call to love our neighbors as ourselves, build an alternative Christ-like Kin-dom, or resist evil, injustice and oppression.

It begins to bubble up in Matthew 9, when people carry a person who was paralyzed to Jesus. Seeing their faith, Jesus said, "Be encouraged, my child, your sins are forgiven." Jesus removes the stigma of a popular but oppressive theology that named differences as sin. The legal experts pouted, "This man is insulting God," by freely proclaiming forgiveness. We relive this question of authority today in regards to who is fully included despite Jesus telling us, "I assure you... whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven," in Matthew 16 and again in Matthew 18 just to make it clear. Chapter 9 ends with the Bible experts accusing Jesus of being in league with 'the king of demons'.

In Matthew 10, Jesus commissions the disciples to heal people and proclaim, "God's kin-dom has come near"! "God with us" is a subtle and disruptive declaration of embodied theology: God offers healthcare, feeds people, dines with outcasts, stands with the prisoners, flips over unjust tables, and proclaims forgiveness through us. God's kingdom is about more church services and daily prayers; it includes people, defends people, and resists systemic oppression. Jesus warns us, "Watch out for people—they will hand you over to church councils, beat you up, and haul you off to the governor. And, dear ones, if they call me Beelzebub, it's certain that they will call you even worse names." (adapted)

In chapter 11, Jesus critiques his church critics, "John the Baptist did not eat or drink, and you said, 'John has a demon.' Yet when I come eating and drinking, you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" Why is it that some

church people can never be for anything or anyone? Three chapters in a row these people linked Jesus' authority and personhood with the devil. Today, people are attacking our trans and gay siblings in Christ. If you are feeling the weight of their attack, remember they called Jesus names too!

In chapter 12, church leaders are upset that Jesus breaks Sabbath laws (punishable by death according to Exodus 35). They begin plotting to destroy Jesus.

Chapter 13 tells how a farmer planted wheat in their fields, but during the night an enemy snuck in and sowed weeds among the wheat. That parable always puzzled me. But maybe we are strengthened in our struggle for justice and equity knowing that Jesus names the reality of sneaky, mean, tricky enemies- who only want to blow things up. The Lord taught us to pray, "forgive as we forgive others" but also "deliver us from evil."

In chapter 14, King Herod murders John the Baptist while in custody. John's disciples came to Jesus for comfort and they all withdrew to a deserted place to grieve. Our Lord knows the pain of systemic injustice. Jesus hears our cries, crying out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me; why are you so far from saving me?" (Psalm 22)

In chapter 15, Jesus undoes the Levitical law proclaiming, "Listen and understand. It's not what goes into the mouth that contaminates a person in God's sight. It's what comes out of the mouth (evil thinking, murder, broken vows, promiscuity, theft, lying and insults) that contaminates the person." The disciples inform Jesus, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended by what you just said?" Some moderating forces want us to tone down our inclusive understanding so that others can speak their exclusion more freely. Jesus was not too concerned when his inclusive vision offended such misguided but perhaps well-meaning folks!

In chapter 16 Peter will confess Jesus as the Messiah and "from that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and legal experts, and that he had to be killed and raised on the third day." Jesus names systems that will kill him.

In chapter 17, we hear Jesus say for a second time, "The Human One is about to be delivered over into human hands. They will kill him. But he will be raised on the third day." And they were heartbroken.

In chapter 19, more testing by the Pharisees.

In chapter 20, while making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, for the third time Jesus tells the disciples, "Look, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Human One will be handed over to the chief priests and legal experts. They will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles to be ridiculed, tortured, and crucified. But he will be raised on the third day." So let me ask you directly, how does Jesus' confrontation with such

systemic oppression figure into your personal theology? Do you understand your baptismal vow to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever form as fundamental to how you follow Jesus?

In chapter 21 right after Palm Sunday, Jesus went into the temple and threw out all those who were selling and buying there, flipping over the unfair currency tables, shutting down the temple while chanting, "It's written, my house will be called a house of prayer. But you've made the church a hideout for crooks." The powers that be demanded, 'by what authority are you doing this?' and tried to arrest Jesus, but they feared the crowds, who thought he was a prophet."

In chapter 22, an alliance of the Pharisees (Torah students, observant, devout synagogue worshippers) and the hellenized supporters of King Herod (and thereby the Roman Empire) form an unusual alliance. This happened in chapter 16 as well as the Pharisees and more secular and scholarly Sadducees colluded. The two parties viewed each other with cultural, political, and religious suspicion only uniting to undo Jesus's movement. They try to entrap Jesus.

In chapter 23, Jesus rails, "You shut people out of the kingdom of heaven. You don't enter yourselves, and you won't allow those who want to enter to do so. You tie up heavy burdens (laws and shame)! Look, I'm sending you prophets, wise people, and legal experts. Some of them you will kill and crucify. And some you will chase from city to city." Jesus ends this rebuke in tears, weeping in prayer for systems that in trying to hold onto old wine and ways, crush the spirit and break people.

In chapter 24, Jesus warns us that faithful Christians will be arrested, abused, and killed. Jesus tells us to flee persecution, remember most of the disciples scatter when the soldiers show up.

In chapter 26, Jesus will be tried twice, first by the church and then the state. The police will lay hands on Jesus, spitting, beating and mocking Jesus. They kept Jesus awake all night as 'the whole council was looking for false testimony against Jesus.' The church trial ends with a death sentence for blasphemy, a speech and word crime.

In Matthew 27 at first light, "all the chief priests and elders of the people conferred together against Jesus to bring about his death." As they move from their own religious courts to Roman state courts, they adjust the charge from blasphemy to insurrection so Pilate can execute Jesus. Let's stop blaming the crowd for chanting "crucify him," but look deeper into the systems that converged to shut down Jesus' good news for all people. (Luke 2)

So what does all this conflict and stress mean for us? How does Jesus' conflict with the church, cultural, and state powers shape the things we do or what we believe about God and neighbor? Does it permeate our views about who is a neighbor, judicial

misconduct, or church trials? Do we see Jesus in those oppressed? Do we feel Christ's presence when the world seems to be crushing us?

The Easter angels promise, "Christ is risen and going on ahead of you." Then the risen Christ came near and said, "I've received all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all people baptizing and teaching everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age." Christ is with us in our struggle to resist evil, injustice, and oppression. Christ is already out ahead pulling us reluctantly along into a fuller expression of God's perfecting love. Let us embody our faith for Christ is crucified and risen, and with us in our personal walk and in our communal struggle. Amen.