

God, your love finds full expression in the gift of Jesus Christ, who at the risk of his own betrayal and death, protested against imperial abuse. Give us the courage to live just as obediently as he did. Amen.

April 14, 2019 – Luke 19:28-40

“Imagine a World with No Need for Protests”

Religion and politics. Some understand the “separation of church and state” to mean that politics needs to stay out of the pulpit. There should be no mixing, they say, of religion and politics. But I not only feel that religion should call out political powers when they abuse the people they are supposed to be serving, I also believe true religion *must* do so.

To think differently, is to ignore Moses’ insistence that Pharaoh desist in his treatment of the Jewish immigrants in Egypt, calling him out with the words, “Let my people go.” To think differently is to disregard the prophet Nathan, who confronted King David about his sin of having a war veteran killed so he could take the man’s wife as his own. It’s to overlook the prophet Elijah, who confronted King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, when they executed a Jewish citizen in order to acquire his ancestral vineyard. To assume that religion should not call out political powers is to conveniently forget that John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded for reproving Herod for divorcing his wife and unlawfully taking the wife of his brother.

And to say politics and religion shouldn’t mix when we examine this morning’s text, is to be guilty of sanitizing what was actually a political protest, an act that would no doubt contribute to Jesus’ execution in the days to come.

It happened during the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. The Passover is a remembrance of the liberation of the Jews from their oppressive Egyptian overlords centuries ago. And in the context of today’s scripture passage they were, once again, being crushed by another tyrannical regime: the Roman Empire.

The Passover was one of three pilgrimage festivals set aside for people to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem. It was an opportunity for the Jewish community to reaffirm their commitment to their covenant with God and to strengthen their self-identification as a nation and religious community.

And so it would have been important for Pilate to flex his military muscles, so to speak, with a display of imperial power in order to squash any thoughts of insurrection.

Bible scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan paint a picture for us of this standard practice of military muscle flexing: “Imagine the imperial procession’s arrival in the city. A visual [display] of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds, [like the] marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.” (p. 3 of “The Last Week,” by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan)

And even as this would have been taking place on the west side of the city, Jesus approached from the east with a prearranged counter-procession. We know it was prearranged because all the disciples had to say was the Rabbi was in need of the colt. The owner of the colt had clearly already been given instructions to release it for the ensuing political protest.

“Jesus’ procession [timed to] deliberately [counter] what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate’s procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus’ procession embodied an alternate vision, the kin-dom of God. This contrast between the kin-dom of God and the kingdom of Caesar is central to the story of Jesus and early Christianity.” (p. 4, “The Last Week) And the confrontation between these two would ultimately end with the execution of Jesus.

Religion and politics. It hasn’t been that long ago that religion played a pivotal role in the civil rights of African Americans. Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham,

Alabama, after having been beaten, after having his house bombed, and after white businessmen told him pointedly, “If I were you, I’d get out of here,” urged Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to come to Birmingham. King’s goal was to fill the Birmingham jails to overflowing, so as to bring national attention to the issue of racial violence that had been taking place.

One of the younger members of King’s team, James Bevel, had an idea: Let’s make schoolchildren our foot soldiers. They don’t have jobs to lose. There are lots of them. Let’s fill the jails with kids. King was opposed to the idea initially. But Bevel persisted, and the kids insisted, and when King went off to a speaking engagement elsewhere, the children were deployed.

The rest is history. The kids came out in droves. The jails filled to overflowing, and still the kids kept coming. Bull Connor finally did what they hoped and prayed he would: He got tough. He called out the dogs and pulled out the firehoses.

Soon enough, the entire nation saw images of children pressed up against buildings, enduring the lash of a water stream that could strip the bark off trees. Police dogs lunging, their teeth bared, at children. Open brutality on the streets of Birmingham, Alabama.

That’s what it took. The nation gasped. The Kennedy brothers got off the sidelines. The white businessmen in Birmingham began negotiating in earnest. By May, they had promised to discontinue practices that enforced segregation there.

In June, President Kennedy addressed the nation, saying:

The heart of the question is ... whether we are going to treat [all] our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place?

(<https://missoulacurrent.com/opinion/2019/02/mary-moe-birmingham-jail/>)

I wish there were no need for protests in our world. But until the day arrives when all people are treated with the dignity they deserve, until they are treated equally under the law of the land and in the eyes of God, I will use my voice to protest injustice because I believe religion should not only call out political powers when they abuse the people they are supposed to be serving, but true religion *must* do so. I believe we are called as people of faith, as people of good conscience, to speak up for the voiceless.

And so I will not make apology for speaking to elected officials about the abuse of inmates in a for-profit prison system. Nor will I stop standing in front of the county courthouse in protest of the mistreatment of local immigrants. Nor will I soften my rhetoric about legislators who pass hate-filled laws that oppress the LGBTQ population. If that sort of thing makes anyone uncomfortable, I understand. I feel uncomfortable, too. But I’m afraid we will both have to just live with our discomfort. Or better yet, we could join together in protest of the abuse of human rights and draw strength and support from each other.

Because I cannot keep silent. There were those who tried to get Jesus to tone down his disciples in this morning’s text. “Teacher,” they cried, “rebuke your disciples.” But he refused, saying “I tell you, if they were to keep silent, the very stones would cry out.”

If there is any rebuking to be done, it’s the rebuke of a religion that supports and affirms political powers which oppress people who are already marginalized. If there is any rebuking to be done, it’s to rebuke the prejudicial and hate-filled rhetoric which contributes to violence. If there is any rebuking to be done, it’s to rebuke a nation that turns a blind eye to the sick, the hungry, the homeless, and the dying within its streets.

May we as people of faith join in this business of rebuke. May we speak out against injustice wherever it is found. And may we always be a voice for the voiceless and a reflection of God’s will on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.