

“Not in Charge!”

Sermon on Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020

“We are not in charge of this!” “The virus controls the time table.” These are some of the insights we’ve been forced to accept over the last few weeks, and the “we” is bigger now than at any time I can remember. It includes people not just in our community, not just in the United States of America, but across the entire globe. It affects powerful companies and normally rich major league clubs; it hurts the workers that are being laid off or furloughed in droves these days; and it includes all of us making hasty adjustments to work and family life. As much as we want to hurry this thing up and get “back to normal” ASAP, the national pandemic “tsar” Doctor Fauci is absolutely right in his assessment: the virus (that tiny little virus!) controls the timeline. And we? We are used to being in charge of our lives, used to making plans as we please, used to going out when we want, used to scheduling ahead for several months, and now we must concede that we can’t. We are NOT in charge of this!

Not in charge. The stories of Palm Sunday and Holy Week emphasize that theme, they always have, but on many occasions our antennas weren’t ready to receive the signal. We were busy being in charge of our lives. Not just the people in our congregations, mind you, but also the clergy, let me be honest. This time of year pastors and faith leaders are usually busy planning for Holy Week, Easter, Passover and so forth, and are not necessarily all that receptive themselves to receiving God’s counter-cultural signal beaming in dark letters from the cross: “Remember, you are not in charge!” While there are many other interpretations for the meaning of the Christian cross (Love that makes the ultimate sacrifice; redemption; atonement, etc.) this is at once a legitimate interpretation, but also accessible and understandable for everyone. The cross of our Savior Jesus Christ reminds us that we are not in charge of our destiny. Someone else is.

In the story of Holy Week that theme plays out on several levels. When you read the gospel lessons for Palm Sunday, it’s clear that the disciples were not the ones who planned or decided. Far from being principal actors, they get sucked into Holy Week’s daily news bulletins. At the beginning, two of them were asked to secure the smallest available vehicle for Jesus, the equivalent of a modern Smart car or a Fiat 500, certainly not an SUV (no judgment implied). They were asked to go to a certain place and secure a young donkey (a colt), but they had no clue what it was for, just, “The Lord needs it.” They were clearly not in charge. Someone else is.

Jesus seems to be floating above everything that’s going on without interfering with the actions even when he is hurt physically and emotionally. He is calm and collected when they seize him. He doesn’t resist when they torture him. He doesn’t attempt to convince Pilate that he’s innocent. He doesn’t open his mouth in front of the high court. Throughout the ordeal he is amazingly calm and resigned to his fate, not really in charge either. Someone else is. (And he knows it.)

And the aggressors in the story? The gospels portray them as mere stage actors. They do what they do out of conviction or confusion. The high priest wants to see Jesus gone, probably because he is concerned about national peace. Pilate, the Roman representative in Jerusalem

couldn't care less, but ultimately one life doesn't matter to him. He goes along and orders the execution. None of them, not even Pilate, are in charge. Someone else is. (And they don't know it.)

That begs the question: who is in charge? And you probably expect me to give you an enthusiastic A+ Sunday School answer: God. But please know that I very much hesitate to reduce the mystery of life and suffering to a simple and simplistic answer, even a religiously correct and convenient one that would put an end to the suspense. I just don't think that the name of God even deserves to be used that way. See, the simple answers are not helpful here, because they close the case before it is even opened. By far the more important lesson for us is to realize - and accept - that we are not the ones who are in charge. And my guess is it takes a long time and some major life-changing experiences to arrive at that insight. We are right now, collectively going through a life-changing experience. The entire world is. May God help us to accept our humble places in the universe!

Once we buy into that reality, once we recognize that we are but small pieces in a greater puzzle, beloved - yes, important in God's eyes - yes, but ultimately the recipients of a life that has been a gift from the beginning and is not "ours", - once we realize that, we have made a huge step forward in our spiritual journey. The realization of not being in control, but at the same time having the ability to remain confident and faith-filled is a spiritual process, one of the most important ones. And boy, do we have people in our community who could tell us about life events that threw them out of control! Anyone who has (or had) a person with a major addiction in the family can tell you that it's a humbling and often humiliating experience, making you realize that you are not in charge. You just do what you can and pray that you do the right things and pray that your loved one finds a way out of the grip of this disease! Anyone who has been diagnosed with a life-threatening disease knows the feeling of not being in charge. Now it's the doctors, the medical professionals, God, the prayers of your friends... And while the accessibility of detailed medical knowledge is an advantage of our time, allowing us to have some say in treatment options, I think the feeling is still palpable: this disease is so much bigger... and my options are limited.

Yesterday I shared a story that comes from the Buddhist tradition and I'd like to repeat it here because it reminds us of the universality of suffering.

"According to legend, there once was a woman who sought out the Buddha after losing her baby to illness. Crazy with grief, she asked him for medicine to bring her son back from the dead. He replied that he would give her this medicine if she brought him back a white mustard seed from the house of a family that had never experienced death. The woman went door to door, searching for a family untouched by the loss of a loved one. Of course, she could never find such a family. She realized that death touches everyone. And in realizing the universality of grief and death, her suffering lessened."

As we enter Holy Week today, as we continue to face a pandemic that has brought the world to a near standstill, as we long for a return to normalcy and community, let us acknowledge our own limitations in all of this. We are not in charge. Clearly not! But someone is. Jesus knew it. He called that someone "Heavenly Father." And he stayed calm throughout the storm of this horrible week. I suggest we do the same as we face the apex of a pandemic. "Be still and know that I am God." **Amen.**