

Title: Do You See What I See?

Text: Mark 11: 1 - 10

Date: March 25, 2018

Odds are that most any church you go to today will be talking about Palm Sunday. A common theme will be on the response of the crowd, and how their cheers turn into jeers. My intent is to touch on that theme, but really I want to cast the net much wider.

If you'll permit me to start with some simple psychology, there is a phenomenon called "projection." Have you ever noticed that after you have met a person for the first time you have certain expectations about them? Maybe they turn out to be nicer, or less problematic than you thought they would be initially. Or more difficult. What happens to all of us is that our psyche learns to function in the presence of the new, by projecting its history onto the world. So if we have had experiences of betrayal or abuse, for example, we might very well be distrustful. A projection is an *unconscious* mechanism, so you don't know you've done it. Something has been triggered in your psychological history that leaves you, and goes out onto the other person, or organization.

Just as this works with individuals, there can also be a kind of collective projection. So we find some nations hating other nations, and some religious groups hating other religious groups, and some ethnic groups hating other ethnic groups.

I think of this today because clearly there was some kind of collective projection going on amongst the crowd as Jesus enters Jerusalem. With exuberance they cry out, "**Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!**" Their Jewish history, coupled with their reacting against an abusive Roman rule, causes them to manufacture a vivid collective projection onto Jesus. Without even needing to verbalize it, it is as though they reinforce one another by saying, "**Do you see what I see?**" They had a very clear vision of the type of savior they felt they needed. Of course, this same crowd experienced considerable cognitive dissonance when Jesus didn't turn out to be the kind of savior they longed for.

Even this close-knit band of disciples had their own strain of collective projection going on. There are countless examples of this, but an illustration that fits with this season is when Jesus goes to wash the disciples feet, and Simon Peter reacts in horror and says, "**Lord, are you going to wash my feet?**" (John 13:6) Jesus action does *not* conform at all to the disciples' collective projection.

I'd like to pull the camera back a little farther now to include not only Palm Sunday, but also the account of Jesus' crucifixion. Beyond the historical event itself, I'd like to look at our attempt to make sense of it. The gospels themselves are minimally helpful in this regard. Most of the *interpretive* heavy lifting comes 200 or 300 years later. Why did Jesus die *when* he did? Why did Jesus die *the way* he did? What difference does any of this make to our lives? These, of course, are the questions of the centuries. However you answer those questions, Rowan Williams highlights that "**there doesn't seem to be any stage in the history of Christianity when the cross is not an issue. There is no pre-cross Christianity.**"

One of the answers was that a Holy God had a very fundamental problem with a sinful mankind. He had already developed an elaborate system that required that only the literal blood of a perfect sacrifice could redeem his people, and so he then had to develop an elaborate plan to appease his own demands. I think it would be quite interesting to explore what kind of collective projection might be at work in this kind of explanation. What is going on in the human psyche that causes this explanation to have so much sticking power with so many people? I don't intend to explore this now, but if this is of interest to you, I would point you towards the profound work of René Girard.

The reason I am not going to talk about that *this* year is because it has come to my attention that this is not an issue for many of you. The very idea of a blood sacrifice is repugnant to many of you. So then, if this explanation doesn't gain traction with you, I have some other questions for you. Does the crucifixion indeed have any meaning, or is it just an accident of fate? If Jesus entered Jerusalem, knowing that he was going to die, was this almost a form of suicide? Do you bring any *meaning* at all to the cross, or do you believe the best he had to offer was in his wise teachings? These are important questions! Yet considering the percentage of time the gospel writers spend on Jesus' last week, there must have been something significant going on in their minds!

Now as a church geared towards those with an "adult faith," I am relieved that it is not my job to provide simple answers to these questions for you. With regards to all this, however, let me at least give you something to think about. Prepare to be surprised then, as I take you in a totally unexpected direction.

I bet many of you remember a very troubling image from 1963 that hit the magazines during the Vietnam War era. Thích Quảng Đức was a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who burned himself to death in a busy Saigon intersection to protest the persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government at that time. I learned that this monk had prepared himself for his self-immolation through several weeks of meditation, and he did not move at all during this terrifying event. You might be surprised to learn that numerous monks have repeated this practice over the years - most notably Tibetan Buddhist monks.

As horrifying as this is, this practice was also problematic for some since Buddhists have always been taught that suicide is wrong. In light of this, I was quite struck by teaching I heard on this topic.

Speaking about the on-going self-immolation protests in Tibet, His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that **"the ultimate factor is their individual motivation. . . . If motivation [consists of] too much anger, or hatred, then it is negative, [but] if the motivation [comes from a] more compassionate, calm mind, then such acts also can be positive."** Ultimately, he says it can be seen as a kind of "*dharma*," or teaching.

The famous Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh said something very similar, saying it is not fair to label it either as a simple act of suicide, or as an act of political protest. He says, **"To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance. . . The Vietnamese monk, by burning himself, says with all his strength and determination that he can endure the greatest of sufferings to protect his**

peopl.... To express will by burning oneself, therefore, is not to commit an act of destruction, but to perform an act of construction; that is, to suffer and to die for the sake of one's people. This is not suicide. . . . The monk who burns himself has lost neither courage nor hope . . . On the contrary, he is very courageous and hopeful and aspires for something good in the future. He does not think that he is destroying himself; he believes in the good fruition of his act of self-sacrifice for the sake of others... I believe with all my heart that the monks who burned themselves did not aim at the death of their oppressors, but only at a change in their policy. Their enemies are not man. They are intolerance, fanaticism, dictatorship, cupidity, hatred, and discrimination which lie within the heart of man."

Do you see what I see? I am not here to tell you what to believe, but in this Buddhist interpretation of self-immolation I hear a remarkable similarity to what I see in Jesus!

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, I am convinced that he knew that he was facing his death, yet it would be so wrong to describe this as suicide. As Thich Nhat Hanh said, Jesus was proving that everything he said and did in his life "was of utmost importance." His death itself was an act of "dharma." He had "neither lost courage nor hope." He suffered and died for the sake of his own people. His intent was *not* to kill his oppressors, for the enemy is not man, but the intolerance and hatred and discrimination which lies within the heart of mankind. While on the cross Jesus said, full of compassion, "**Forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.**" (Luke 23:34)

If you see in Jesus' death a sacrifice he did on your behalf, once and for all, *what then is required of you?* This could result in passivity. On the other hand, if you see in Jesus' death a model of self-emptying for us all, and an appeal for us all to pick up our cross, then Jesus' death is a powerful example for us, *calling for a response.*

In ten days we will recognize the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was himself a remarkable disciple of Jesus. Thich Nhat Hanh said that he views King as a "**bodhisattva,**" which means "**an enlightened being - one on the path to awakening, who vows to forego complete enlightenment until he or she helps all other beings attain enlightenment.**" Likewise, may we learn to give of our lives, to pick up our cross, with a heart for helping all other beings on the path. In giving of his life, Martin Luther King was proving that everything he had said was of the utmost importance.

So what do you see in Jesus' death? Are you joining your projection with the projection of others? What does Jesus' death mean to you?

I pray that you may see in Jesus' death something more than a grand "checked box." May you see the face of love calling you to follow Jesus on the path of self-surrender, demonstrating that the things we believe are of utmost importance, and calling others to find new freedom as well.

Amen.

Mark 11: 1 – 10

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”