

Opposing Emotions

It's incredible how much the world has changed in the last five weeks. When we gathered for worship on March 1, the first Sunday of Lent, the corona virus was something people were battling with "over there." In the past month, we've discovered this is different than anything most of us have experienced in our lifetime. With schools and businesses closing, traveling curtailed, and safer at home orders in place, some of the markers of our identity have changed. This adds to the basic questions of identity all of us have. *Who do I think I am? Who do others think I am? What is my true identity?* As we interact with other people we question them as well. *Who do you think you are?*

Being human means we deal with questions of identity.¹ Sometimes we struggle with descriptions that other people try to place on us. In Isaiah 50:4-9, the speaker affirms his identity as a prophet. He knows he's been called and instructed by God. He is using the gifts God gave him to help other people. But those around him think he's a phony. They beat him, insult him, and spit on him. As he lives out his prophetic identity, he suffers mockery and abuse. God gives him the strength to withstand the insults and not fight back.

The critics of the prophet use the question of identity as less of an inquiry or invitation and more of an accusation. *Who do you think you are? Do you think you're better than me? Who gave you the right to do that? You're clearly in the wrong!*

During these past six Sundays, we've been on a journey of discovery with Jesus. He has encountered a variety of individuals who have tried to figure out who he is and what he's doing. Some are fascinated. *Who are you?* Some are confused. *Who are you?* Some are outraged. *Who are you?* Let's review the journey we've taken with Jesus, thinking about the people he encounters – who they think he is, what he tells or shows them about who he is, and how their opinions change...or not.

The first week Jesus encounters the tempter in the desert.² The tempter seems to think Jesus is one who values what the world values: satisfying physical needs, grabbing power, receiving glory. The tempter knows Jesus' true identity but thinks Jesus might use his divinity – his divine side – to gain the rewards his human side might crave. But Jesus replies with the words of God. *The Lord is my rock. Don't put God to the test. Worship and serve only God.* Jesus makes hard choices and demonstrates that he is both fully human and fully divine. The tempter leaves in defeat.

The next week Jesus encounters Nicodemus.³ Nicodemus is a well-respected member of his community – a Pharisee. His discontent leads him toward the new life Jesus offers, but his steps are tentative. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. He responds to Jesus' teachings with skepticism. Jesus says that he is the one who has been sent. That all who believe in him will be saved through him. Those who follow him are created anew. Their lives are changed. In the end, Nicodemus is changed too. According to John, he is one of the men who covers Jesus' body with spices after his death and wraps it in strips of linen.⁴

The Samaritan woman sees Jesus as a Jewish man who will, at best, ignore her and, at worst, condemn her.⁵ Jesus tells her he is living water. He's able to satisfy more than her physical thirst. He

¹ This sermon contains ideas adapted from "Pondering the Word: Becoming Human," by Joanna Harader, *Leader*, Winter 2010/11, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia) pp. 28-30.

² Matthew 4:1-11

³ John 3:1-21

⁴ John 19:39

⁵ John 4:5-42

can give her what her heart truly desires. She leaves amazed that this stranger knows more about her than anyone else and still accepts her. She becomes convinced that he is the Messiah, the one they all have been waiting for. She tells everyone she meets about him. Many more believe that he is truly the savior of the world.

The man born blind doesn't know who this person is who puts mud on his eyes and tells him to wash it off in a nearby pool.⁶ But he does as he is told, and comes back able to see. As the story progresses, he increasingly recognizes Jesus' identity – from stranger – to the one who made him see – to a prophet – to one from God – to the Lord – to the Son of Man – to one to be worshipped. Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." When people see him for who he truly is, they see themselves and the people around them the way God sees them. He changes how they relate to each other. The religious leaders in this story see Jesus as a Sabbath breaker and a usurper. They don't see the light. Their opinions of Jesus do not change.

Lazarus and Martha (and later on, Mary too) see Jesus as a relative and friend – one on whom they call for help.⁷ They know physical death is a reality that comes with having a body. Mary is devastated when Lazarus dies and chastises Jesus when he arrives too late to prevent her brother's death. Jesus exposes his humanness when he grieves the death of Lazarus along with the other mourners. He demonstrates his divinity when he brings Lazarus back to life. Many who witness this event are amazed. *This Lord, Jesus Christ, is the resurrection and the life! He is the promise of new life on this earth and of eternal life after the physical body has given out.*

Others are disturbed. *What are we going to do about this man? He is performing many miracles. If we don't stop this now, every man, woman, and child will believe in Him. You know what will happen next? The Romans will think He's mounting a revolution and will destroy our temple. It will be the end of our nation.*⁸

In the story we read on Palm Sunday, Jesus is surrounded by many, many people.⁹ During Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the cheering crowd identifies Jesus as a prophet. And those who don't know Jesus ask the crucial question, "Who is this?" Even though Jesus has given many clues concerning his identity during his ministry – *I give new birth; I can give you living water; I am the light of the world; I restore your life; I come in the name of the Lord* – many are still quite confused about who he is and why he is here.

Some – maybe even most – of those who are supporting him during his entry into Jerusalem are even now becoming a bit disillusioned and beginning to turn on him. They want a King – someone who will defeat the Roman occupiers and restore the kingdom of Israel to its former days of glory. They don't expect this man who comes in peace, riding humbly on a donkey. They don't understand the kind of saving they really need.

Considering the variety of experiences of the people who encountered Jesus along with the recent, sudden changes in our lives might help us answer a question that often arises on Palm Sunday. One day the crowd is spreading cloaks and branches on the road in front of Jesus and shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" A few days later, this crowd is demanding, "Release Barabbas, the notorious criminal. Don't release Jesus! Let Jesus be crucified!" Why the extreme, sudden turn-around?

Of course, one explanation is that it's not the same people doing the shouting on both occasions. With hundreds of thousands of people in Jerusalem to observe Passover, even if there were thousands of people in the crowds each time, there may not have been much, if any, overlap between the two. But I would venture a guess that there were at least a few people who shouted both "Hosanna" and "Crucify

⁶ John 9:1-41

⁷ John 11:1-53

⁸ John 11:47-48, *The Voice*.

⁹ Matthew 21:1-11

Him.” It’s part of human nature. We get caught up in the excitement and the emotion of the moment. We’re swayed by charisma and by power.

In this story of the last week of Jesus’ earthly life, there are real-life dynamics at play. The people in the crowds react to what they know about Jesus, what they’ve witnessed firsthand and also what they’ve heard about him through the grapevine: stories of healing, of changed lives, of promises of a new kingdom. They also respond to what their religious leaders are saying: how Jesus ignores and even blatantly disobeys the laws of God passed down through generations; how he fails to observe the Sabbath, doesn’t observe the purity laws, and consorts with all kinds of disreputable people. They worry about what the Roman officials will do next. Will there be even greater pressure and oppression because of what Jesus is doing and saying and how the Jewish leaders are responding? Is there any safe ground they can occupy before the Roman governor?

Matthew’s telling of Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, trial, and crucifixion is found in chapters 26 and 27. In this account, Matthew paints the Jewish leadership as ignorant, obstinate, and blind to the truth. He depicts Pilate at his cynical best, trying to reassert authority over the priests and drawing in the crowd. Jesus doesn’t orchestrate what happens. Instead he experiences the events that come at him. Matthew highlights the power politics at play in this situation. The crowd – the ordinary people – get caught up in something that they don’t necessarily think about too much, that they don’t necessarily choose.

That same human nature and those same crowd dynamics continue in our current world. It’s human nature to build someone up to great heights based on real or perceived accomplishments and then to tear someone down after they’ve reached the top. It’s human nature to be influenced by power, fear, and self-interest. It happens all the time. It has happened to each of us, even if we don’t want to admit it.

This week I encourage you to think about how you might have participated in the story told in Matthew. Would you have been part of the crowd watching the procession and shouting praise and adoration? *Hosanna, blessed is Jesus who comes in the name of the Lord, who heals our diseases, who forgives our sins, who welcomes the stranger and the outcast, who breaks down the walls that divide us, who is bringing about the kingdom of God.*

Would you have been part of the crowd outside Pilate’s palace shouting condemnation? *Crucify him, he’s blaspheming against God and making a mockery of our religion. He should be gathering and leading an army to defeat the Romans and end their occupation of our country. He’s rocking the boat too much and bringing too much attention from the Romans to our group.*

The truth is, we have parts of both crowds within us.¹⁰ Especially during times of high stress and extreme change, it’s not unusual to experience opposing emotions. During the week from Palm Sunday to Easter we’re always faced with celebrating Jesus’ life while also honoring his death. Perhaps this year it’s easier to do that as we also experience the roller coaster of emotions the current pandemic brings. In step with the cheering crowds, we praise Jesus for who he is. We are thankful for what God has done for us. At the same time, we recognize that not everyone is “blessed” with health and wealth and other gifts. We experience uncertainty, confusion, and fear as the pillars that uphold our lifestyle come crashing down in a matter of days. The paradox is that even in these unsettling times, we still experience and give thanks for the things given to everyone – the gift of life, the beauty we see and hear as spring arrives, the love and connection that continues via mail, email, phone, text and internet.

The questions that arise during Holy Week may seem more pertinent to us now than they did in other years. This part of Jesus’ journey is horrific. Even though we now know that Jesus didn’t stay in the grave, the events of this week are important to remember. We bring our questions to Jesus. *How did you hold the joy and the sorrow together that week? How can we do the same in our lives?* We know that God understands us and can also show us how to hold both, like Jesus did. Thanks be to God!

¹⁰ This last section draws from Lent 6 Worship Resources, *Leader, Winter 2019-2020*, ©2019 MennoMedia pp. 45-46 and the devotional “You are my God, and I will give thanks to You” by Ainslee Zou, <https://www.goshen.edu/devotions/you-are-my-god-and-i-will-give-thanks-to-you/>.