

Palm Sunday Meditations

April 13, 2025

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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1st Meditation: Weeping

As Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”

Jesus wept. The Son of God weeps. You may remember that Jesus weeps in John’s gospel when Lazarus dies. In Luke, Jesus weeps on Palm Sunday. He weeps when he sees Jerusalem. He knows it’s long, fraught history—of glory and humiliation, of love and unfaithfulness. He says, *“If only you had recognized the things that make for peace.”*

Do you look at our world and recognize that same feeling? “If only we knew.” Spiritual maturity is seeing the difference between the way things are and the way God longs for them to be.

The poet William Wordsworth, agonized over the industrial revolution. He wrote:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

We give our hearts away! We do what we ought not do. The way we live is not the way that makes for peace, for shalom. Certainly you see this. You feel this, perhaps deeply.

If you refuse cynicism, if you stay warm and human, if you continue to affirm the sacredness in all things, you will weep.

Weep for the earth, which is our only irreplaceable home. Weep for every one who does not have food, or shelter, or safety. Weep for every act of violence.

Jesus looks at the city. It should have been otherwise. He cries... for us, with us.

If you feel this brokenness this morning, around you and within you, weep.

2nd Meditation: Anger

Then Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there, and he said, "It is written,
'My house shall be a house of prayer,'
but you have made it a den of robbers."

Jesus walks into the holiest place in the world. The place where people come to honor God and declare that the world is God's. They come to the Temple to celebrate the birth of a child, to atone for their faults, to pray for God's blessing.

And in that sacred place, are the grifters and the con-men. Manipulating prices, skimming profit, leeching off of poor pilgrims who come, in faith to seek God.

Jesus loses his cool. In a rage, he drives out the grifters.

Anger is a basic human emotion. You know it. What is it that makes you angry?

(Photo montage w/music)

The desert father Evagrius wrote that anger is given to us by God to help us confront true evil. Anger can be for good.

But if we use it casually, against others, to gratify our own desire for power or control, we become the evil we deplore.

Anger can be a gift. But God's anger is different than ours. Beware.

3rd Meditation: Change

⁹ Jesus began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard and leased it to tenants and went away for a long time. ¹⁰ When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard, but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹ Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. ¹² And he sent still a third; this one also they wounded and threw out. ¹³ Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’ ¹⁴ But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, ‘This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.’ ¹⁵ So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” When they heard this, they said, “Heaven forbid!” ¹⁷ But he looked at them and said, “What then does this text mean:

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone’?^[a]

¹⁸ “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” ¹⁹ When the scribes and chief priests realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people.

The “wicked tenants” is on no one’s list of favorite parables of Jesus. It’s a hard one.

The parable draws from a deep well of Jewish storytelling. Way back in Isaiah 5, there is a story of a vineyard that is destroyed. In Isaiah’s old story, the owner and tender of the vineyard is God, who lovingly cares for the vines. The vineyard in that story is us, God’s people. As Isaiah tells it, tragically, we produce rotten fruit because of our injustice.

Jesus tells a new version of the vineyard. The owner is far away. The work of the vineyard is left to tenants who are supposed to care for the vines and deliver the fruit to owner at harvest. But when the owner sends representatives to collect the grapes, the tenants act with shocking disrespect, and finally, with the violent killing of the owner’s own son.

In the early church was a parable about the refusal of the religious leaders to accept Jesus as the one sent by God. Luke, writing after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE by the Romans, saw that as a judgment against those leaders. In the centuries that followed, this story gave rise to antisemitism, to the dehumanization and murder of millions of Jews.

Who are these “wicked” tenants? If we as the church have been entrusted with the care of God’s vineyard, have we been faithful? *Have we been faithful with what God entrusted to us in our private and public lives--as individuals and as institutions?*

If a system is dysfunctional, replacing bad actors with new actors will not result in better outcomes. Unless people in the system become aware of the forces which produce the dysfunction and work to change or redirect those forces, the dysfunction will re-emerge and the outcomes will remain the same. A religious community that is self-serving, self-satisfied, that gathers and keeps power is a community of wicked tenants.

Perhaps this parable is more useful than it first seems, if it is a story about how unjust systems function. How might this system change?

What if the relationship between owner and tenant could be one of trust instead of suspicion? What if the tenants loved the owner, and the owner loved the tenants? What if the tenants had a stake in the vineyard? And the son—perhaps the son knows something about how grapes grow? Perhaps then the coming of the son is the cause of rejoicing by the tenants?

And even if the tenants are suspicious of the son, and push him away, what if the owner does not respond with rage and retribution? What if the owner responds with mercy? What if the owner that the only way to mend this relationship, to build trust, is to respond always, and forever, with love? What changes then?

4th Meditation: Offering

²⁰ So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said and then to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. ²¹ So they asked him, “Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. ²² Is it lawful for us to pay tribute to Caesar or not?” ²³ But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, ²⁴ “Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?” They said, “Caesar’s.” ²⁵ He said to them, “Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” ²⁶ And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said, and being amazed by his answer they became silent.

The empire imposed itself upon the land and all the people, extracting wealth, squelching freedom, oppressing everyone with threats of violence. The question was a trap to get Jesus to defy the empire. Do we need to pay taxes to this empire, Jesus?

Jesus hold up a coin, with Caesar’s image, and says, “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and give to God what is God’s.” Jesus is not saying, “go ahead, be obedient, and pay your taxes.” If that’s what he meant, no one would be amazed.

Jesus forced them to think—what is Caesar’s, and what is God’s? Caesar minted his face on a coin, and tried to imprint his power on the world through violence. But it was God who had imprinted God’s image on every human face, in every human heart, on inch of Creation.

Everything, Jesus implied, is God’s. Even Caesar.

To whom do you own your life? What can you do with what you have been given, to show your gratitude to the Giver of Every Gift?