
The gift of choice
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 21:1-11, 28-46

During Lent this year we have been discussing different gifts that come with Lent - at no extra charge. We have discussed the gift of temptation, the gift of peace, the gift of truth, the gift of healing, and the gift of “the other”. And today the advertised theme is the gift of choice. But wait a minute. Isn’t this Palm Sunday today? What happened to that? Now obviously Palm Sunday is not as popular as Easter because we get chocolate at Easter. But Palm Sunday is important too because we get to wave palm branches around. Why is Rev Paul not talking about the gift of palm branches today? Or perhaps the gift of a really good party.

Well obviously, I think that there is some connection between Palm Sunday and the gift of choice. And you probably expect me to try to explain that.

But I won’t do that ... today. Because Palm Sunday is also the beginning of Holy Week. Holy Week will end next Sunday, on Easter Sunday. And this sermon will end on Easter Sunday too. Because I really want us all to live into the drama of Holy Week this year. When this Palm Sunday service ends, I do not want anyone to think that it is over. Holy Week is just getting started.

I confess that when I was a kid, I don’t remember this at all. We all went to church on Palm Sunday and were given palm branches which we waved, shook, and hit each other with as we raced around the sanctuary. That’s what I remember anyway. And one week later, Easter Sunday, was another happy occasion full of chocolate eggs, hard-boiled eggs and other treats. Oh, and I guess Jesus was in there somewhere. But what I remember was going from one happy occasion - Palm Sunday - to another happy occasion - Easter Sunday. I don’t remember any drama in Holy Week when I was a kid because I don’t even remember Holy Week from when I was a kid.

But as I have come to have a much better understanding of the Christian faith, I have come to realize that the drama of Holy Week is actually pretty important. And you

will miss all of that if you leave here today and do not come back until Easter Sunday. So I really hope that we all take advantage of the drama that will be unfolding this week.

[image: holy week schedule]

Holy Week is perhaps the most dramatic part of the Christian calendar. I mean, Christmas is fun. But during Advent - which is the four week period leading up to Christmas - the themes are all very similar: Love, Joy, Peace, Hope. All happy themes. Advent is an exercise in repetition as we simply wait for the metaphorical birth of Jesus.

But Holy Week is different. Because Holy Week follows the journey of Jesus at the end of his public ministry. And the end of Jesus's ministry was challenging to say the least. And Jesus's disciples - like us - had their own reactions to the drama that was unfolding before their eyes. In broad strokes, Holy Week needs to at least include:

- Palm Sunday. A time of joy and celebration. Plus a chance to push back against the dominant forces of the day. Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem was a parody - a lampoon - of the parade that Pilate was having on the other side of town after all. If that's news to you, talk to me.
- Maundy Thursday. Which includes a meal we call the "last supper". The last supper morphed into Holy Communion. A meal that began in joy but turned into confusion and frustration as Judas first confronted, then abandoned, and then betrayed his friend, Jesus. For the disciples, Maundy Thursday was a time of confusion, disappointment, and confusion. Yes, I mentioned confusion twice. Because that would have been the dominant mood on Maundy Thursday.
- Good Friday. Jesus dies. That's pretty depressing. The dream ends in tears.
- Easter Sunday. The spirit of Jesus returns. Joy returns. The dream continues. Hope lives again.

That's a lot of drama to pack into a single week. Holy Week beats the crackers out of Advent for pure drama, excitement, and emotion. Holy Week - like real life - contains ups and downs, highs and low, having expectations dashed and also great joy.

Besides, if you do not participate in all of the action of Holy Week, this sermon won't make any sense. Because if we ignore the highs and lows of Holy Week, or if we ignore the highs and lows of our own lives, then we cannot really talk about the gift of choice. If life was all rainbows and unicorns there would be no gift in choice because there would be no choices to make.

[image: fork in the road]

I suppose I should put a bit of effort in connecting Palm Sunday to choice now. And actually, it's not Palm Sunday so much as all of Holy Week. Holy Week is all about choice. We've already discussed that we all personally have the choice of participating in the extra Holy Week activities between today and Easter Sunday. That's one choice we all get to make.

But I want to talk about a choice that Matthew made. Because I think that Matthew got it wrong. Massively wrong. It probably wasn't really his fault. But he got it wrong. And his wrong choice has cost many lives over the past 2000 years. Matthew made a choice. But we can always choose differently. Lent is all about choice.

So what did Matthew get wrong? It's something we often get wrong ourselves. In fact, I have made the same mistake myself. And I want to tell you my story as a lead into to Mathew's choice. Because my story has better visuals.

Years ago my mother got into painting. Mainly oils and watercolour. So sometimes when I went to visit her, I would paint something. When we cleaned out her home, I actually found some of my attempts at oil painting. In fact I found my very first attempt at painting in oils. It was a pear. I remember working from a magazine clipping that had a pear on a white background, with a bit of a shadow.

Do you want to see my first ever oil painting?

[image: pear 1]

Ok. That was my first attempt at the pear. It is terrible of course. No real sense of relief or depth. And the background "flourish" is because I had no idea how to deal with the shadow.

Do you want to see my second attempt? Which was like 10 minutes later?

[image: pear 2]

It is still terrible. But you can see some attempt at 3D relief. And I still had no idea how to deal with the shadow.

Do you want to see my third attempt? This was perhaps one hour later because we took a coffee break. But all three attempts were done in the same morning.

[image: pear 3]

Much better, right? Do you want to know how I got it so much better? Simple. After the coffee break, when I looked at my first 2 attempts, I realized the mistake I had made. I made a mistake that I'm sure that many beginning artists make. My mistake was that I looked at the picture of the pear in the magazine. Then I decided that the object was a pear. Then I decided that I knew what a pear looks like. Then I painted what - in my mind - a pear was supposed to look like.

My first two attempts were terrible because I painted what I expected to see - not what I actually saw.

The reason my third attempt at painting the pear was so much better is that I stopped trying to paint a pear. Instead I simply painted what I saw. No interpretation. No conceptualization. No imagination. No thinking. I Just tried to paint what I saw. And the outcome was much much better.

As we all know, in life it is very easy to come to a conclusion about how the world should work. And then we interpret everything from that perspective. We do not always see what is right in front of us. Instead, we see what we expect to see. Or perhaps we see what we want to see. We sometimes see what we would rather see instead of seeing reality. And I'm sure that many of us can share stories about that.

[image: Jesus in "real life"]

Matthew made the same mistake. Matthew was so committed to the idea that Jesus was the Jewish messiah that he could not see the Jesus that was right in front of him. Jesus was nothing like the messiah that was anticipated 2000 years ago. In fact, it is easy for all of us to see Jesus as who we want to see. For example, I sometimes see Jesus on a bicycle.

[image: Jesus on a bicycle]

Are you surprised that I flatly state that Jesus was not the Jewish messiah? Why

am I going against 2000 years of tradition? I think it is self-evident actually - if we actually look at who Jesus was instead of our own (or Matthew's) expectations.

Here is why I am convinced that Jesus was not the Jewish messiah.

For one thing, the vast majority of Jewish people living in Palestine at the time of Jesus did not see Jesus as their messiah. And they were faithful, educated, sensible people. The fact that almost all Jewish people in Jesus's day did not see Jesus as messiah should at least give us pause for thought. Why was Jesus not accepted by most Jews as messiah? Because he wasn't.

Secondly, Jesus did not fulfill any of the important expectations of the Jewish messiah found in the Old Testament or in Jewish tradition. The messiah was expected to build the third temple. To gather all Jews back to the land of Israel. To usher in an era of world peace. To end all hatred, oppression, suffering and disease. Jesus did none of those things. Moreover, the messiah was supposed to liberate the people from oppression - which in Palestine in those days meant the Roman Empire. Jesus did not defeat the Romans. In fact, Jesus never even spoke against the Roman Empire. Jesus saved his harshest criticisms for uncaring religious leaders. Jesus did not seem to even care about the Roman occupation.

Jesus was not the Jewish messiah.

But that did not stop Matthew writing his gospel based - not on the Jesus that was in front of his face - but on the anticipated messiah from his Jewish expectations. Which explains the readings we had today.

The first reading today was Matthew's version of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Well, riding two animals actually. In the story Jesus rode on a donkey and on a colt at the same time. If that surprises you, please reach out. That is a very interesting story. The story today is about how people reacted to Jesus. Jesus had been visiting villages, teaching and healing people, so yes he was popular. Popular enough to have a parade.

The lectionary wanted us to stop reading there. But I added two stories that follow almost immediately after. The parable of the two sons. And the parable of the wicked tenants.

In the parable of the two sons we contrast the behaviours of two sons. One son says that he will obey his father, but does not do it. The other son says that he will not obey his father, but goes off and does anyway. Then Jesus - at least Matthew's Jesus - compares the Jewish religious leaders to the second son - who talks a good game but is disobedient. And Jesus compares tax-collector and prostitutes to the first son - who do not talk a good game, but are penitent and faithful. The parable is clear. Matthew is saying that the current Jewish leaders are wrong (because they did not recognize Jesus as messiah) and that Jesus's followers are right.

If that is not clear enough, that is followed by the parable of the wicked tenants. The parable is actually an allegory. In the allegory, The landowner is God, and the original tenants are the Jewish people. The tenants disrespect the landowner and disrespect the landowner's son, so the landowner kicks them out and gives the vineyard to other people - e.g. the followers of Jesus.

The tenants (who represent Jewish people) do not respect the landowner (who is God) even to the point of killing the son (who is Jesus). So God kicks out the tenants (Jewish people) and gives the vineyard to people who will respect him (followers of Jesus).

To quote, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."

When Matthew crafted these stories they described a rift between different Jewish communities - those who saw Jesus as messiah and those who did not. But over time the Jesus group morphed into a new religion entirely ... commonly known as Christianity. And the meaning of the story of the wicked tenants evolved to describe how Christians "replaced" Jews as God's chosen people.

[image: supercessionism, replacement theology, new jew]

That idea is called "supercessionism" because Christians superseded Jews as the recipients of God's grace. It is also called "replacement theology" because Christians replaced Jews as God's "chosen people". It has also traditionally been said that Christians are the "New Jew". These are all very offensive ideas of course. And I stand against all of those ideas.

All that happened because Matthew insisted that Jesus was the Jewish messiah, when Jesus was not. Matthew's choice led to massive amounts of antisemitism and the killing of many people - on both sides - over the past 2000 years. Matthew's words - and other words in the New Testament have been used to endorse Christian antisemitism for centuries.

But as I said earlier. That is wrong. Matthew was not looking at the Jesus that was right in front of his face. Matthew made a choice that was wrong.

[image: you are free to choose ...]

As I said in Chit-Chat this week ... "You are free to choose. But you are not free from the consequences of your choices". Matthew made a choice. We have been given the gift of choosing differently. Among other things, I hope that this Holy Week we will all look with a bit more openness towards our Jewish neighbours. Christians do not need to "replace" anybody. Christians do not need a Jewish messiah anyway.

[image: Morpheus- you have a choice]

What choices have you made that led to poor outcomes? What choices have you made that led to good outcomes? We all have the gift of choosing. And often, we have the gift of choosing differently as we continue to learn and grow.

As I said, this reflection will continue next week. Not only to discuss the gift of choice, but the gift of where our choices can take us.

As we rapidly move towards Easter, consider what new life you are looking for? What resurrection do you need in your own life? The journey of Holy Week is a great time to consider new choices. Consider new life. Consider resurrection.

To be continued

Amen.