

16th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 10.1.17

Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7
Matthew 21:23-32

When the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Jesus and asked him, “By what authority are you doing these things?” they meant, “By what authority are you being so disruptive?” They didn’t say as much, but in saying “these things” we can assume the chief priests and elders were speaking of the things he’d been doing since coming to Jerusalem, since coming to the Temple and therefore the realm of the chief priests and elders.

To begin with, there was the way he entered Jerusalem, come down from the Mount of Olives as ready for battle, and entering through the city gate in a mock parade of spoofed grandeur, riding a donkey as if it were a warhorse, followed by peasants as if they were a king’s courtiers.

From there he went into the courtyard of the Temple, and overturned the tables of moneychangers and the seats of those who sold animals for sacrifice (doves, maybe some sheep). He yelled at the people there, people who weren’t doing anything wrong, who were doing what they’d always done, providing pilgrims with what they needed for worship at the altar.

Then, after spending the night in Bethany, he returned to the city and, hungry, he came across a fig tree. But it bore no fruit. It should be said that it wasn’t in season so its bearing no fruit would have come as no surprise. Whatever. Jesus cursed the fig tree so now it would never bear fruit.

Really, defiant of the customs of the city, its pomp and pageantry; defiant of the laws of the Temple, its rites and life-giving order; defiant even of the laws of nature, its seasons and growth: Jesus was wasting no time in this, his final week. He was getting right to the business of being disruptive.

It had been a long time coming. Jesus was, from the beginning, someone whose very being promised disruption. Surely this is one implication of the Immaculate Conception and Virgin Birth. We’re wrong to think this indicates that God is squeamish about sex. What’s really implied here is that Jesus, from the start, disrupted the way things are, the “facts of life.” He was an interruption into history of something eternal, something transcendent. He was a violation of human norms and of nature’s way.

So would go his life and ministry. Always transgressing the law (working on the Sabbath), even violating the holiness code (eating with sinners and interacting with people who were a public health threat for their being unclean), Jesus, it seems, answered to an authority other than the religious authorities.

So the authorities of the Temple, these who kept the way the people had established for social order and common safety: they wanted to know, by what authority he did these things.

It's a fair question.

Though I imagine this is part of what we like about Jesus. I imagine we appreciate Jesus as someone who didn't just go along to get along, someone who instead "questioned authority" and "to his own self was true." Really, we Americans love a rebel, one with or without a cause. And we liberal Christians love the idea of being more spirited than doctrinal, more spontaneous than dogmatic. Of course, the UCC is nothing if not open to new understandings of how to be a people of God. "Never place a period where God has put a comma," so our logo encourages. Tradition for tradition's sake is lazy, idolatrous.

And these days, disruption is downright worshipped as our last, hope. In technology, in industry, in politics, to be disruptive is to be innovative and future-oriented.

But there is a cost here. There is a cost to what Jesus was up to. Disrupting the status quo is risky, can even be dangerous, and not only to the one or ones doing the agitating but to the whole system. Because, though it's easy for us to believe that what social structure Jesus was defying (the Temple, the Law) was just stupid, formal and fussy and so worthy of defiance, it was actually quite enlightened and worthy of respect. In practice, much had gone wrong. But in aim, it was largely to the good—safeguarding people from mysterious and perhaps contagious illness, remembering the poor and orphaned and widowed, and keeping at bay the empire in whose good graces the people Israel must remain as an imperative of their survival. The law in practice was no legalistic nightmare, not totally so. Really, it for the most part worked—had a for a long time.

It just didn't work well enough to be considered, in an absolute sense, good.

So Jesus defied it—he who was, it's implied, in an absolute sense, good.

But, really, on what authority did he do so? Because his blithe manner in defiance is a little unsettling. These structures of civilization: you know they *can* go away. Civilization *can* collapse. And then? Well, then, God help us all.

Please believe me, I'm surprised to be saying this to you — as surprised as you might be in hearing it. It was only a few years ago that I was implying otherwise, that in my preaching I spoke in hopeful anticipation of the disruption that Jesus promised and made possible. Revealing as he was that no system is perfect, no human governance or social structure is beyond critique, Jesus brought an honest light to what systemic and structural evil we (of the privileged class at least) might otherwise happily overlook — and this struck as happy-making news. Theologian Ronald Sider once claimed, “God longs for the salvation of the rich as much as for the salvation of poor... Salvation for the rich will include liberation from their injustice.” Well, wanting such salvation for myself, wanting to be “woke” in the parlance of today, I looked forward to the possibility that such a thing might happen.

Empire collapsing beneath its own weight...

Lately, though...

I have a friend and colleague who is deeply committed to humanitarian work and deeply offended by what he perceives as the imperial aims of our country. For this, running up to the election, in conversation, he always seemed much more open than I was to the possibility of Hilary Clinton losing. He saw her as one more would-be imperial president. Emblematic of the status quo, she stood for more of the same, which he could less and less tolerate. A Trump presidency, for all its wrong-headedness, might at least also be a disruption, the sort of thing we all might need in order to have the moral courage to make things better — to address racism and, at long last, to dismantle white supremacy; to rejigger the economy so it's more equitable and responsive; to reconsider our attitudes about mineral extraction, our practice of dominion over our environment, and our privatization of public trust and treasure, land and spaces; to rethink our nuclear arsenal, which stands ready for the president's command, whosoever that person as president might be. Sometimes an utter breakdown is pretext for an utter breakthrough.

But sometimes an utter breakdown is just that — an utter breakdown. With little notion of what we should build up amidst the ruins; with little agreement as to whose vision is worthy of our seeing it through to realization; with nearly no consent as to who is

authoritative and deserving of our following; really, with no permission to decide upon what is good—neither how to recognize the good, nor to measure competing goods to find which is the most good, nor to name the good for what it is (that is, something better than everything else for its meeting the criterion we have established for testing the goodness of what means to be good): we could well fall to catastrophe and never—for years, decades, generations perhaps—get back up.

Liberal society courts libertine individualism at its own risk—and what a risk it is.

Jesus intended none of this, of course. Jesus wasn't a libertine and he wasn't a hedonist and he wasn't individualistic, and yet as one whose very being is a disruption, he could also come to us at great cost.

Oh, what a faithless preacher I've become. I sound like the Israelites: "Why did you bring us out here to the wilderness, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst—and all when we could have stayed in Egypt where at least we had enough to eat?"

Here's Walter Brueggemann, whom I offer as a corrective: "The exodus liberation promised a new existence for Israel, filled with joy, freedom, and well-being. However the withdrawal from the imperial system of Egypt brought Israel only to the wilderness, which gave no well-being. The wilderness is a place of no water. The 'wilderness' is a place where the guaranteed life-supports of empire are missing. Thus Israel was plunged into crisis... which is presented as a crisis of leadership. The Egyptian imperial system had given neither dignity nor freedom, but it had offered a steady supply of food and water, if in exchange for servitude..."

Now, out of empire, in the leanness of wilderness faith, Israel's need and thirst and yearning lead to restlessness and an outcry against the leadership of Moses. Moses, however, isn't the real leader...Yahweh is. God is the one responsible for the mismatch between expectation and delivery; [God is the one whose promise outruns its fulfillment]. For this reason, Moses questions and accuses God. Yahweh, in turn, offers a response both abrupt and decisive—an issuing of a command and [then of] a promise."

The command: "Go on ahead of the people, take some of the elders with you; take your walking stick and go."

The promise: "I will be standing there in front of you."

Mr. Brueggemann continues: “The promise is as lean and as unaccommodating as the command... Moses obeys. Yahweh delivers. Water comes. Israel drinks. The crisis is averted. The narrative tells us all this in one brief sentence—this situation in which Yahweh sustained life but in a lean, precarious, anxiety-producing way [which is to say, a way] that requires deep trust.”

Interesting that the Lord was with them even when they were facing a struggle of leadership. That should have me asking now, perhaps have us all asking now: “Is the Lord among us or not?” Because if the answer ever was yes, then it must still be yes, because that’s the nature of God.

But, you know, there’s something else about this story that’s interesting to me. That the water comes from a rock: it might be easy to assume this detail is to emphasize just how miraculous this miracle of finding water in the desert is. Finding enough water in such a wilderness as this, enough for everyone to drink and be satisfied: amazing! But finding it in a rock? Now that’s what I call a miracle!

But it wasn’t just spectacle that I think the Lord intended in this detail. In fact, I think it wasn’t spectacle at all—though sometimes the spectacular is a good way to get people’s attention. No, I think here the Lord was intending transformation.

Look how rocks were perceived earlier in the passage. Moses feared that, with all these rocks around, the people might well stone him to death. And he wasn’t being hyperbolic. That’s a thing that happened, that happens still. In primitive societies where people live close together and close to the bone, custom and law sometimes aren’t enough; these things sometimes need to be spectacularly enforced, viscerally felt. A stoning could bring about catharsis among a worked up people, which could then bring calm, a much-needed thing when fear and panic threaten to overwhelm. Stoning Moses could well have made the people *feel* better, and this would have made them better because when you’re in a precarious situation it is sometimes true that what you’re right to fear most is fear itself.

A good stoning can release the pressure of fear, can make everyone really *feel* that the fearsome thing has been expunged, and now everyone’s safe again. A righteous stoning can be powerfully curative, even life-giving—just not to the one stoned.

So the Lord has another life-giving in mind, another *generation* in mind. The rocks won't be used to bring about a life-generating death, but to spring forth water, enough for everyone, life-generating life.

The same would be true some time later when serpents will have begun to overwhelm the camp, and they will have bitten many people, and those people would die. But the Lord would tell Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and to affix it to a pole, and then to erect the pole over the people suffering a serpent's bite that they might look up to it and live. Once again, the threat of something the Lord transforms into its cure.

So it is with the cross. Right? The cross, one of the most terrifying displays of imperial power and dehumanizing torture, transformed into a new generation of life and community.

I'll tell you something. I look around these days, at all the apparent threats, and wonder at how each, any, even one of them, might be transformed into a new solution.

Did you know that there are microbes newly discovered in the ocean? They've evolved to eat plastic. More recently, it's been found that wax worms eat plastic bags, and quickly.

This is the beginning of a new week, a new month. We have before us bare provision and among us persistent promise.

As ever, thanks be to God.