

April 13, 2014
 Luke 19:28 – 40

Rev. Jerry Deck

Several years ago now I was at the Atlanta airport and, as I have often done when I was at that particular airport, I decided to go to Chic-fil-a. As I was standing in line I kept hearing this voice that sounded somewhat familiar to me. So, I turn around and standing right behind me, preparing to order his Chic-fil-a sandwich and lemonade was the boxer Evander Holyfield. I didn't want to stare, but I also kept thinking is that really him? Should I give him a fake jab and see what happens? I didn't, but the rest of the day I kept thinking, "That was weird, did that just happen?"

A few years before that I was I was in the bustling metropolis of Cleveland, Tennessee, putting my college degree to work by working at a fine-dining establishment called Shoney's. It was around a half-hour before closing when they told me that I had a customer (which I wasn't very happy about) and so I came around the corner and there sitting in a booth was the then Kentucky, and now Louisville, basketball coach, Rick Pitino. I thought, "Could this be Rick Pitino, at a Shoney's in Cleveland, Tennessee." And the rest of the night I was in this state of shock, thinking, "What just happened," "Did that just happen?"

My guess is that most of us have had moments like this when something surprising happens and we think, "Wait . . . what . . . did that just happen?" In many ways I feel like this must have happened a lot when Jesus was around. Jesus was always doing surprising things, things folks didn't expect, things that must have left folks heads spinning. And we see this throughout the 19th chapter. It begins with the story most children love about Zacchaeus. And as you may recall Zacchaeus was a wee little man and so he decided to climb up on a tree, not so that he could be seen, but so that he could see Jesus.

And as Jesus is walking under the tree he all of a sudden looks up and says, "Zacchaeus, you come down for I must stay at your house today." And can't you just imagine Zacchaeus, thinking, "What just happened, did he ask me to come to my house." And then the whole time that Jesus is at his home, he had to be thinking, "Is this happening? "Is Jesus really in my house?" And after he left he must have been thinking, "Did that just happen?" And, of course, we're told that he wasn't the only one who was surprised and thinking, "What's happening," because Luke tells us that all who were there were grumbling and saying, "Why is Jesus here?"

And right after that Jesus begins to tell a parable. And I won't go into it too much, because that is a sermon in itself, but I will say that it is a parable full of more surprises that ends with Jesus saying, "As for those enemies of mine who didn't want me to be king, bring them here and slaughter them in my presence." Wait, what? What did he just say? But before we get an answer about what that was about, Luke quickly moves on and, as the 28th verse says, "Jesus went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem." So, to the staff member that asked the question of "what did Jesus

say right before our passage today” that’s what he said.” Not, my guess is what you would have expected.

But Jesus and the 19th chapter are not yet done with their surprises. Because after getting to the Mount of Olives he sends two disciples and tells them to go into the village and to find a colt (what Matthew describes as the colt of a donkey) that’s tied up and to simply untie it and bring it here. And if you’re one of the disciples, aren’t you thinking, “Wait? What? Just untie it?” So, they had to be relieved when Jesus started saying, “If anyone asks you why you are untying it . . .” Ok, great . . . “tell them the Lord needs it.” Wait. What? Just tell them that and they’re going to let us take it?! But they go and sure enough, amazingly enough, the donkey is there, just as Jesus said. And don’t you know they’re hoping to sneakily untie that thing without anyone noticing. But, of course someone does notice. “Why are you untying the colt?” “Um . . . the Lord needs it?” “Oh. Ok.” Wait? What? Did that just happen? And so they brought it to Jesus.

And so Jesus began riding down to Jerusalem. It was a ritual that had happened many times before where a conquering king would ride down to Jerusalem and people would sing praises to the king and throw their cloaks before him. And can’t you just see the crowds of disciples knowing that Jesus was coming, throwing down their cloaks, singing praises and then seeing him clip-cloppety by . . . on a donkey. This is not what other kings have done. They rode on beautiful mature horses, not on baby donkeys. And so, can’t you just see them thinking somewhat surprisingly, “Wait? What? That’s not what we were expecting.”

Then, finally, something that is not unexpected, not surprising happens. Which is the Pharisees asking Jesus to have the people stop praising him, stop worshipping him. Most of us would have expected that, right? Coming from the Pharisees, this is normal, predictable. So we get something of a reprieve for a moment. But then the surprises begin again when Jesus responds to the Pharisees by telling them that the stones, (as someone has said, the deadest things around) would cry out if the disciples stopped. Again, “What, the stones?!” What, are they going to grow mouths and just start belting out a worship tune?

I told you, the 19th chapter is just strange event after strange event. Surprise after surprise. It’s simply the way Jesus seemed to work. And yet, with all of those strange events, with all those head scratchers, with all of those surprises, perhaps the strangest and most surprising thing is one that we don’t often notice or talk about. Not Jesus hanging out with Zacchaeus or Jesus’ strange words after the parable or just taking a donkey or the fact that the guy let him take the colt or Jesus riding a donkey or him saying that the stones could start singing praises. While all of those things are odd, to be sure, I don’t think they are the oddest thing in this chapter. The oddest thing, it seems to me, is that the Pharisees in this story are actually right. That the Pharisees, the ones Jesus is always battling, the ones who we are always deriding, the group that always seems so out of it, are actually the smartest ones of the bunch, the most astute. (And I’m not just saying this because

they were religious leaders and we all know that the religious leaders are usually the smartest folks around!)

What's important for or us to remember is that in gospel of Luke, the Pharisees aren't looked at quite as badly as they are in other gospels. In fact, in the 13th chapter of Luke we see the Pharisees protecting Jesus from Herod. Which I think tips us off to what's going on here. That certainly, while some of the Pharisees may simply not have liked the fact that Jesus were being worshipped, that there's also a sense that the Pharisees are the savvy ones of the bunch and they realize, more than any of the disciples, that if the Romans hear that someone other than the Roman emperor is being worshipped as king then what's going to happen? Yeah, jail or death. And this is what, amazingly enough, surprisingly enough, the Pharisees get, that even the disciples don't yet see it. That worshipping Jesus as King, as God, is dangerous. Let me say this again. What the Pharisees understood and what the disciples didn't yet understand, but will in a few days, is that worship, real worship of Jesus, is laden with danger.

Now that may seem kind of strange. I mean when we sit around at lunch on a Sunday afternoon and say, "Wow, what a good worship service today" we don't usually describe it as being dangerous. We talk about it moving us or touching us or making us think. Now there's nothing wrong with that and good worship can certainly do move us or touch us or make us think, but if that's where it stops then we might want to ask whether or not we're really worshipping God. Because when you are truly worshipping God then danger is usually not far around the corner.

Listen to these words from Mark Labberton. "When worship is our response to the One who alone is worthy of it-Jesus Christ-then our lives are on their way to being turned inside out. Every dimension of self-centered living becomes endangered as we come to share God's self-giving heart." Why is true worship always dangerous? Because it forces us to order our lives not around who the powers of this world are (be they Romans or money or comfort or security) and not around who we are and what we want, but around who God is and what God wants, and that will always put us, and our own desires, danger. True worship is dangerous because it forces us to die to ourselves in order to live for God, the one we're worshipping. Each song we sing, each prayer we pray, each scripture passage we read, each sermon we hear preached is saying, "You God, not this world and not who I am, are the King of this world," and that is always a dangerous thing to say.

People oftentimes come to me as a pastor and complain that on Sunday mornings, instead of being here at worship, so many folks are asleep in their beds or at a ballpark or in a coffee shop and I have to tell you, in one sense those folks who stay away from worship may be the smartest ones of the bunch. Because they're making sure they can stay safe. Honestly, I still can't believe that so many of you come here on Sunday mornings, because if you're here and you really get what's going on in worship, you're putting yourself in a pretty dangerous place. A place where you have to keep dying to what you want, dying to what the world tells you you deserve.

As I've thought of it I realized that when people come up to me or Scott or Jon and say, "Hey, great worship today," I think we should start saying, "We'll see." Because we won't really know if it's been great worship until we see later in the week whether our worship has helped us to put our own desires and this world's demand at danger or whether we've allowed those things to remain the priority in our lives. But if we don't put those things in danger then the reality is that it may have been worship, but I'm not sure we were worshipping God.

But it's important for us to see that true worship is not just dangerous to us and our own desires, but is dangerous to others as well. Because a people, a group of disciples who week after week are dangerously allowing God to be the priority in their lives eventually become a dangerous people themselves. Why was Jesus dangerous to the Romans and the Pharisees? Because he lived by a different set of priorities, a God-centered set of priorities. He knew why he was there and his life was not shaped by what they thought important. It's why on that Palm Sunday he could courageously, and dangerously, walk right into the teeth of the Roman people of the religious leaders.

And think about the transformation of the disciples. Here they are on Palm Sunday, and yes they're "worshipping" but in only a few days they will be running for cover, ducking from danger and, of course, not a danger to anyone or anything. Quite frankly not making much of a difference in the world. And then, after the resurrection and especially after Pentecost, these disciples and their descendants begin to change the world. Why? Because they were smarter than others? No, just read the gospels and you'll see how stupid they can be? Because they had more money? Of course, not. The vast majority of them were an oppressed people engaging in low paying jobs. Because they had the military might? No, in fact Jesus kept shunning their desire to use force. They became a danger to the world and started changing the world because they finally started worshipping God as the priority of their life which means they were able to die to themselves and start radically living out the gospel, no matter what danger they were in. And because of that the world was never the same. This was what the Pharisees and the Romans knew and were so afraid of. As Mark Labberton says, "worship sets us free from ourselves to be free for God and for God's purposes in the world," and that is a dangerous position.

I told you all last week about a conversation I had with my friend Joel, who lives in Denver. Joel is a great friend and yet, I oftentimes find myself a bit nervous to talk to him. Not because he's mean, but because, quite frankly. Like me, Joel spent six years as a solo pastor of a Presbyterian church in the state of Illinois. It was a good job, the people were kind by and large, the cost of living was low, the salary was good and the pension and medical were outstanding. And as you would expect Joel kept worshipping each and every week. But Joel was really worshipping as could be seen by the fact that his life kept getting reordered more and more around God. And that worship became dangerous for Joel and his family. Dangerous because after six years he decided that he was going to leave his good paying, incredibly secure, job

and move himself, his wife and their three kids, to Denver where he had no job, no benefits, and no security.

Because in dangerously worshipping God and continually prioritizing God in his life, he and his wife kept dying to themselves until eventually he realized that for him, he was called to leave that security behind, move to Denver, move into a community and simply start loving everyone in his neighborhood. And this is no romantic tale. It hasn't been easy. He started out dumpster-diving to support his family. He sells things at flea markets to make ends meet and he and his wife pick up odd jobs to keep the family afloat. And I don't think he'll be listening to this, so I'll say that I can hear the stress in his voice at times, I can hear his exhaustion. But here's the thing, I also hear the voice of a guy who is in full worship mode and who has said, "I don't care what people think, I don't care that my parents and many of my friends think I'm crazy or irresponsible, I'm simply going to keep loving God and neighbor in a radical way. And the other thing about it is that not only now is Joel and his family living dangerously, but his neighbors are in danger as well. Because this guy will not stop reaching out to them and loving them and engaging with them until they know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that God is alive and that God loves them. And when they start realizing that, then their lives are in danger as well, because God is going to start asking them to change their priorities, to change their lives.

And Joel is a danger to me, because every time I talk to him I am forced to ask myself whether or not I am worshipping God in a way that will cost me something or whether I am just worshipping until my ears are tickled and my heart is warmed. I am in danger, not because I think God is calling me to start dumpster diving (by no means!), but because, well, when you start worshipping God and putting him first you really never know what God might call you to do. And that, sisters and brothers, is a dangerous thing.

We are entering into the most dangerous week in scripture. Some, like the Pharisees, will not begin worshipping because they astutely realize that it will cost them something. Others, like the disciples on that day, will worship with great energy and joy until they begin to see just how dangerous worship can be. But Jesus keeps moving forward, knowing the cost, knowing the danger, because his priorities have been shaped by the Father to whom he dangerously prayed, "Not my will, but thine be done." A prayer that comes only through the intimacy of relationship, borne out of dangerous worship. Sisters and brothers, the question before us today is a simple one. Who will we follow? Who will we worship? The Pharisees? The disciples? Or the Jesus who says worship me, no matter the danger or the cost, and I promise that you and this world will never be the same. That is true worship. Are we willing to worship like that? We'll see. We'll see.

