

People of the Way

From the series: The Way of Peace/The Way of the Cross
Lent IV

Acts 9:1-2, Matthew 16:21-26

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Before there was any talk about Jesus as some kind of God figure, before there was any talk about God as Triune, any Doctrine of the Trinity, there was a Jew named Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, a fully human being, and those who followed him believed that he was God's Messiah. Messiah is a transliteration from the Hebrew and the word means anointed. As you know, *Messiah* in Hebrew transliterates into English from the Greek as *Christ*. So that early band of followers believed that Jesus, this man that they knew to be fully human, was the anointed of God, and the special anointed one who would deliver Israel from all of its troubles and establish the dream, that marvelous, prophetic dream of the new Eden, that dream of the harmony between God and creation, between God and humanity, between humanity and creation and between human being and human being, that total harmony which, in a word, is *Shalom*. Those who followed Jesus believed him to be the anointed one of God to effect that dream. In so believing, they followed him with great expectation.

The early followers were all Jewish and that Jewish movement became eventually a largely Gentile movement, and tragically became separated from the womb of Judaism and eventually became the Christian Church. The Jewish followers of Jesus, following his crucifixion and resurrection, believed that he would come again, because obviously their hopes and dreams for what the Messiah would do had not happened. In the argument between the ongoing Jewish community and these Jewish followers of Jesus, the argument about the Messiah came down to this: the ongoing Jewish community said, "Messiah has come? Right, already! Look at the world. This is the Messianic kingdom?" And, of course, a crucified Messiah did throw the wrench into the machinery. How could they explain a crucified Messiah? Out of that apocalyptic expectation came this whole idea of the Messiah who came would come again, or the one who came would come as the Messiah. There were various ideas floating around at that time. But, essentially, there was an ongoing Jewish community who said, "The Messiah is still to come. Just look at the world."

And there was a Jewish Jesus community that said, "Messiah has come and will come again shortly, imminently, and establish the kingdom according to all of our hopes and dreams."

So, two communities, both of them expecting a Messiah because they really were one community. But, one part of that community saying he is still to come, and the other part of that community saying he has come and he is coming again to finish the work.

If I could argue with both communities for a moment, I would say to the Jewish community, "You are right in that you expect the Messiah to be a fully human being. There is nothing in the Hebrew scriptures that would give the idea that the one who would come anointed with the spirit of God was anything but human. There was the expectation of a human being fully anointed with the spirit of God."

And I would say to the Christian community, "But you are right that Messiah has come, that human being has arrived." And how are we going to put all of that together? To the orthodox of the Jewish community expecting Messiah to come through some great intervention of God to make it all right, and the Christian community expecting Messiah to return as a great act of God to make it all right, I would say, "Both of you are expecting one to come and a great intervention of God to make it all right. One of you believes that one has come. The other believes that one is still coming. I want to say to both of you, nobody is coming."

To the Jewish community, I want to say, "You are right. The one who came was human."

To the Christian community, I want to say, "You're right. That one has come. When the word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

And I want to say to both Jewish and Christian communities there is no future grand act of God out there. God has acted in one Jesus, fully human, full of the spirit, and the final revelation of God is in the embodiment of the human in Jesus, not just Jesus alone, but Jesus as the model or paradigm of the intention of God. If there was a universal embodiment of that which Jesus embodied, we would realize the Shalom of the prophet's dream. The way of Jesus is the way of peace. And the people who gathered around him began to be called *People of the Way*.

If we go to the text of the morning for a moment, Jesus was very clear about what lay ahead of him. I think those verses in Matthew 16 are stylized after the fact, crucified and on a third day rise again, and all of that. That prediction is just too neat. If it was all that simple and clear ahead of time, why all the confusion?

But, on the other hand, it is understandable that Jesus with his followers would have talked about the inevitability of what lay before him. Must they not have gathered in the evening and talked about where they were and what was happening, and what would happen tomorrow, and did not Jesus know that the way of peace would

become the way of the cross? So, to talk about that was not predictive prophecy, it was just awareness and common sense. Was not the fate of the prophet traditionally to be rejected, to suffer and to die? Did they not have John the Baptist in their own recent experience who was killed by the king? And so, they talked about it and then Jesus said, "If anybody would follow me, let him take up his cross daily. If anyone would be my follower, my disciple, it will involve a daily taking up of the cross and a following in my way. And you ought to know that it is a dangerous and serious business, because you do so at the risk of your life, for if you follow me, it will cost you your life. But, ironically, thereby you will find life." That was the clear claim and call of Jesus, "Follow me, cross, loss of life, which is life.

To take up one's cross is a dangerous and a serious business, and it ought not to be done, Jesus said, without clarity. No subterfuge, no fudging here. Oh, we speak often about bearing our cross. People often sympathize with Nancy being married to me and she says, "Yes, it is just the cross I bear." Well, that is not the cross she bears, it is just lack of judgment and bad luck. To bear your cross is a deliberate and voluntary act, in this case, of discipleship and becoming one of the people of the way. There were those who followed him that believed in him and they made the choice, and a community began to grow so that, having crucified Jesus to get him out of the way, was not to do away with the threat after all, and so there continued to be persecution, first of all within the Sadducean Temple crew because this community was a threat to that established order.

Paul, in all of his zeal and all of his good Hebrew faith, was on his way to do damage to the people of the way when he is turned around in his tracks and now he begins to see that this one was, indeed, God's anointed one, and he becomes the flaming evangelist throughout that ancient world. Finally, returning to Jerusalem to worship, he is recognized by some who knew him in Ephesus and they point him out and they have him arrested, and eventually he comes before the Roman governor, and now this one who was about to stamp out the people of the way acknowledges before the Roman governor, "I am of the way which my brothers and sisters call a sect." That's what we do in the religious game, of course. Any other group that gets a little bit fuzzy on the edges we call a sect or a cult. That is what was happening. This was an inter-Jewish story. All of these people were Jewish. Paul was never anything but a Jew. The disciples were never anything but Jewish. The early community was nothing but Jewish, and Paul had hoped that this Messiah, Jesus, could be incorporated within the covenant faith of Israel. There was no reason in the world why there had to be a break and a fracture. Nonetheless, the Roman imperial power could not allow this community to flourish, because finally it was Rome that saw the threat to its empire. Finally it was Rome that crucified Jesus.

We know about the Roman persecution of that early movement. Go to Rome and visit the catacombs and see eloquent witness to the persecution of those people and how they had to worship down in the bowels of the earth. Rome could not countenance a religious movement that would not bow down to the imperial throne. Rome didn't really care how many sacrifices you offered or how many candles you burned. The one thing Rome said was, "Acknowledge that Caesar is Lord and you

can be anything else." In the Christian community, the followers of Jesus, the people of way, said, "That is precisely what we cannot do, because the one we followed challenged that whole confession of Caesar as Lord. No, Caesar is not Kyrios, Jesus is Kyrios, the most elemental, simple and clear confession of that early movement. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord over against Caesar is Lord. You cannot have it both ways.

And so, for the first three centuries of that Jesus movement, now tragically having been aborted from its Jewish home and family, now largely a Gentile phenomenon, nonetheless keeping alive the dangerous memory of Jesus, these people were hunted and haunted and persecuted because they didn't fit. They did not fit into the imperial structure. They did not serve in the military. They were advocates of non-violence like Jesus was. They lived an entirely different kind of life. They were an alternative society, because people of the way were followers of the way, the way of Jesus, which was the way of peace. They were followers of the way of Jesus, which was the way of non-violence. They did not fit and, as Jesus had said, it is risky business, but if you take the risk, you find your life.

I don't think Constantine made some pious discovery about Jesus Christ. I think Constantine and the cynicism of imperial power saw the vitality of this community and finally recognized them and let them be and within a couple of decades the Christian Church was the established religion of the empire. Marvelous, wasn't it? Except it cost the Church its soul, because the Church had been a movement of people of the way in the way of Jesus, which was the way of peace. Now they were a part of that apparatus of power.

About a century later, St. Augustine, one of the greatest thinkers of the Church, wrestled with that issue. St. Augustine knew good and well that love was at the heart of Jesus' message, knew well enough that there had been three plus centuries of generally pacifist response to imperial power, but now what do you do when you are in power? He wrestled with that in all of his intellectual acuteness, and constructed what is still known as the Just War theory which struggled with this issue as to when a Christian can go to war, when military action can be justified, and a whole series of criteria by which that is to be judged. It is still alive today. It has been debated and argued over the centuries, but as far as the West and Christendom is concerned, there has never been a power that I know of that has gone to war without trying to justify it in terms of the Just War theory which goes back to Augustine. So, it has made a difference, even in imperial power. The dangerous memory of Jesus has haunted those who have named his name and wanted to be considered a part of the way.

Now, we are at war, and so we hope and pray for its speedy ending, we hope and pray for as little tragedy and devastation as possible, we hope and pray for the safety of all of those in harm's way, but there is something more going on in our world today. I think as never before, there is a global conversation about peace. I suppose it has been enabled by the world-wide web. I have gotten more significant documents over the internet these past weeks than I can remember. I am aware of networks that

circle the globe. There are conversations going on everywhere and there are demonstrations for peace around the world. Even as the war is being executed, there are those who are speaking of peace, and of the fact that in our world today,

war is a luxury we can no longer afford. I am hopeful this morning, because I do believe that we may well be on the threshold of a whole new era of global peace.

This last twentieth century, at least in its first half, was the most violent in recorded history. There was the First World War and all of that tragedy, there was the Communist revolution and all of the death of the Stalin era. There was the rise of totalitarianism, Naziism in Germany and that awful Holocaust. There was the Second World War with all of the destruction and death. It was continuation of the war system. And then the world was divided up into two blocs, East and West, and we lived for some four decades in a balance of terror.

Don't you remember the balance of terror? Don't you remember living under the shadow of the mushroom cloud? Two massive powers with missiles pointed at each other, knowing that to strike was to be struck, knowing that to strike was to annihilate and to be annihilated? Ironically, that balance of terror kept violence at a minimum. But, there was oppression and despotism. People were suffering, and the people began this movement which, in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, began to erode the power structures. Do you remember the prayer meetings in Leipzig and the lighting of the candles, the candle vigils in those German cities? Do you remember our growing anticipation of the possibility that this deadlock might be broken? Do you remember the euphoria of the falling of the Berlin Wall? And even after the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, with all the unraveling of Yugoslavia, and the Balkan tragedy, nonetheless, there is a conversation, there is a people-power afoot. In that balance of terror between the East and the West, someone has said that was the powerlessness of the powerful. Right? Powerlessness of the powerful. We were crippled, mutually crippled by the power of the other.

Yaclav Havel, the former President of the Czech Republic, who is a philosopher and a poet, you might expect, has suggested that the people-power today is the power of the powerless. I love that. The world may be at war right now, but there is a conversation going on. There is a subversive conversation which can trace itself back to the dangerous memory of Jesus, and I don't even care if you don't want to find it in Jesus. Find it in the Dalai Lama, if you will. But, Desmond Tutu found it in Jesus and he was here last week in the area to say how what seemed just a few short years ago to have to issue in a terrible bloodbath could issue in a peace and a reconciliation because of people-power.

The people are powerful. In the Vietnam era, they dethroned a President. And the Secretary of Defense during that era just a short time ago, with tears, repented of his part in that American military venture. Dear friends, we are not hopeless nor helpless. For all of the distortions of the Church, for all of the corruptions of the Church, the dangerous memory of Jesus is still kept alive when the bread is broken

and the cup is poured out, when he said, "Do you want to really live at the risk of your life? Follow me. Take up your cross and follow me."

He was a dreamer, he was a prophet, he was a threat to established order, he was a visionary, he was a de-stabler. Don't you love him? Don't you want to follow him?