

APRIL 20, 2025

Marion weekly update

SERMON April 13 - "Which Gate Will You Choose?" Matthew 7:13-14, Matthew 21:1-11

This morning is really a tale of two processions. One of them we read about in the gospels. The other we know about from history. Each of them represents a path for us to follow and today we ask the question which one we'll choose.

Without meaning to, we stumbled on a good way to wrap up the last couple weeks' messages. The parables have some consistent themes, one of them being the Kingdom of God. This was evident the last two Sundays and we'll put the exclamation point on it today.

These two processions happen in Jerusalem around the Passover. Some suggest they may have happened at exactly the same time. Perhaps they did, it would certainly add to the drama of the message. Even if not, they most certainly occurred fairly close to one another, making the comparison and contrast just as legitimate.

The first is Pontius Pilate. As the governor he came representing Rome, or we might say representing the world. As a people who were known to rise up from time to time, there was concern when a major Jewish city ballooned in population. The concern is even moreso when they are gathering for a grand celebration of liberation. What if they got some ideas? What if they decided this was another chance to try and break off the yoke of the empire?

He likely entered through the west or main gate of the city. The point of his arrival? Maintain order. Rome had a very particular way of keeping the peace. It was called "peace through victory". This is another way of saying "might makes right". In other words stay compliant and you should be fine. Don't and get squashed.

Pilate's procession would have been with the pride and ceremony of the Roman empire. It would have been a show of force. Soldiers. Horses. Chariots. Troops intended to send a message of who was in control and not to buck that control. Whomever was strongest stayed in charge and it wasn't going to be the subjects. It was going to be the rulers. In a word they came to intimidate.

We also know that the Roman Empire, particularly among the elite, had a reputation for immorality. Of particular concern for us is that they had rather horrific methods of torture. Execution was not necessarily humane as evidenced by crucifixion. Stand against the empire and face potentially gruesome and final consequence.

This is the procession of Pontius Pilate.

On the other hand we have the procession of Jesus. Jesus comes in through a western gate, likely the Golden Gate. His is a very different event.

No horses. No military. No threats. No intimidation. No arrogance. None of that.

He arrives on a humble donkey. He asks nothing of the people, they offer their cheers and praise freely. His followers are humble themselves. Likely on foot they are simple companions who have walked with Him spreading a message of grace, compassion, love, and the present and near Kingdom of God.

Jesus' message of peace is different. It isn't about might and keeping another under forced control. This is the One who said to love our enemies. If someone strikes one cheek give them the other, don't retaliate. A bully asks you to walk with them a mile? Go two. They ask for your shirt? Give them your coat as well.

This is the Jesus who would wash the feet of His disciples as an example to remind them that they are to be about serving others, not lording over them.

His was a procession of the Kingdom of God. The cross would tell His spirit greater than anything else. In Rome step out of line and the King would punish you. In the Kingdom of Heaven the King goes to His own execution to forgive the times you step out of line.

This is the procession of the Kingdom of Heaven. It's referred to as peace through justice.

One benefits whomever is strongest at the expense of the rest. The other benefits all. One is

temporary, the other lasting.

Essentially Rome's peace was fleeting because eventually someone stronger will always come along. Their rule was imposed rather than requested. In truth, fear of retribution has always been unreliable in making a lasting peace.

Think about teaching a child to do something because if they don't they will get a punishment. If that's the only reason they behave but deep down don't agree with the rule, when the punishment isn't there anymore they do as they please. Teach them to do something because it is right and correct and that lesson remains even if an imposed punishment is removed.

Jesus' peace would be lasting because it relies on community, love, mutuality, and corporate agreement. Love our neighbor, if everyone were to follow it is a much stronger foundation for peace than "kick your neighbor in the teeth if you don't like them. They'll fall into line." Peace through justice is about seeing that all are loved and cared for. It's about everyone wanting to see what is just reign. Sadly we haven't seen this come to pass yet because it seems there's always people in the world that thrive on conflict, reserve the right to hate, need someone to be less than, and want to feel like they have power over another.

Two men. Two gates. Two vastly different senses of what kind of kingdom they want in this world. Which gate do we enter?

This gate analogy is one used by Jesus Himself. He talks about the narrow gate. Keep in mind that when He is speaking He isn't talking about the cross and it's meaning. This event hasn't yet happened. It is always in the context of "follow me".

This doesn't ignore that there are many other statements of belief written in the New Testament. There are. Those statements are more than words. We know this because they don't and can't alter the words of Jesus Himself. And what does Jesus say about following?

The act of following is just that, action. What do we do? How do we live?

There are plenty of messages out there claiming to be saving. "Believe what I'm telling you and you get the prize of salvation". There are messages on messages in Jesus name that are leading people everywhere BUT through the "narrow gate".

Jesus over and over gain says that if we belong to Him we will do our utmost to live as He lived. We will embrace His example and belief is demonstrated by a transformation of life into one that follows the expectations of God's Kingdom and strives to bring that life here and now.

In Matthew this statement about the narrow gate is at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. That sermon is all about what our lives are to look like, the condition of our heart, and how those two things link together. There are few gates wider than the ones that just require a password or phrase that everyone knows. Backing up our claim with the way we live our lives is much harder. It's a much narrower gate.

Which gate are we going through?

Are we going through the main gate? Do we follow the power, pride, and wealth of the world? Do we see others as expendable, even disposable? Do we put our own interests above those of the people around us?

In our actions do we follow the world through the broad gate of a Pontius Pilate?

Or do we choose more bravely, more sacrificially?

Loving unconditionally. Standing up for the needs of those others would pass by or even afflict. Using what we have to uplift those who are suffering and in need. Forgiving freely and seeking to build rather than burn bridges. Humility rather than pride. Extending the hand of friendship rather than judging.

Being Christ to the one shamed by the religious because of a mistake, or shunned because they don't quite fit a mold. And being willing to take the gossip behind our backs because we might dare to do so. Building a world where the peace never ends because it is based on a mutual community and love. Never fear or intimidation.

This is the Golden Gate. The gate of Christ. The narrow gate.

The rise or fall of our own spirit, and ultimately of the world depends on which gate we choose. The way it all works out depends on choosing the correct gate and inviting and inspiring others to follow us

through it.

As we go into Holy Week there are so many events that we recognize. Jesus clears the Temple. He is confronted by religious leaders. He has the last supper with His disciples, giving them instructions for when He is gone. He is falsely tried, convicted, and executed on the cross. Then the uncertainty of Saturday in the grave.

How we reflect on these things begins with Palm Sunday and the gate we have chosen in our hearts and is reflected in the daily words and deeds of our lives.

Let our perspective be shaped by hearts and lives that have chosen the gate of Jesus. It will lead us to a greater and deeper appreciation of Good Friday. And the appreciation of Good Friday elevates the celebration, thanks, and joy as we come together next Sunday to worship in the light and grace of the Resurrection.

After the celebration the work continues. Bring the Kingdom of God to the world until the world and God's Kingdom are one.

BIBLE STUDY 2 Samuel 19

In the aftermath of David's battle with Absalom we begin to see the larger and longer impact of their feud. The beginning of Israel splitting as a nation has begun.

The first scene is one that reveals Joab's boldness as well as his understanding of politics and strategy. Whatever he may be, hot-tempered and self-involved as he is, he isn't dumb. He sees the danger inherent in David's emotional state and calls him on it.

David has for years flipped his roles in ways that have harmed his family and ultimately Israel. It would seem that his concern for optics as a king drove distance between himself and Absalom. For years David kept him away giving time for Absalom's hatred to grow and to scheme to take the throne. Rather than be a father and reconcile with his son, David has preferred the role of king and made sure to not be too cozy with the murderer of Amnon, the original heir to the throne.

Now that the fruits of that father/son rift have come to pass, David flips roles from king to fatherly. It is now that he expresses the sorrow and emotion of a father openly and without restraint.

When he should have been a father he acted in the interests of being a king. Now that he needs to be a king and lead he is acting in the manner of a father. The result is that the men who have just fought and bled to keep David on the throne are unappreciated. Rather than gratitude for their sacrifice they are seeing the man whom they saved wishing he were dead and the one they saved him from alive.

Joab sees this and knows that David can't afford to alienate this group that has been by his side loyally to the point of death. He calls it out, and David comes around to act like a king and show his thanks for what the men have done.

As with so much of David's mistakes this is a cautionary tale for all of us. Knowing what role to be in and when is critical. There are times when perhaps our job takes a front seat. We may have to make hard choices in order for the greater good of whomever we serve. Personal preferences may need to take second priority. On the other hand there are times when our personal roles need to be first and foremost. Setting them aside creates havoc that will not only affect our personal relationships. The way they tear at us ourselves affects every single other aspect of our life, including professionally.

Getting the balance right is important not just for ourselves but for many others in our lives.

What unfolds next uses several characters that have already been mentioned to convey some diplomatic patching up of Israel. David, as we've seen, is now back in a mode that he was in before he was crowned king. He is making smart political moves in how he handles relationships now that he's been set straight by Joab.

Amasa: We don't know if David really knows that Joab has killed Absalom. Whatever the case Amasa is appointed in Joab's role. David has noted Joab's temper already. He was upset when Joab murdered Abner and made that abundantly clear. Despite Joab's savvy, perhaps his nature is now more of a liability as he is trying to keep Israel together. Amasa had standing in Absalom's army. If there is a

rift between Judah and the rest of Israel this concession might be a good way to show some grace and deference to the larger set of tribes.

Mephibosheth and Ziba: Ziba had told David that Mephibosheth was lying back as an opportunist expecting that Saul's line(his own line) would be restored to power. David had given him all of Mephibosheth's lands as a result. Now we get Mephibosheth's side of the story. According to him, he had wanted to go with David as David left Jerusalem but Ziba refused to help him saddle his donkey to go. Mephibosheth was lame so walking would have been out of the question. (It may have been that the donkey Mephibosheth had requested was stolen by Ziba and given to David!) What to do?

David can't fully corroborate either side of the story. So he decides to split the lands. A diplomatic solution when you can't sort out the truth. Mephibosheth shows a sense of genuineness when he tells David to let Ziba have it all. He is content and grateful for how David has taken him in and cared for him. What more could he want?

This isn't just David looking for fairness, it's also politically savvy. He can't afford to have any more contention. If Ziba was being sneaky he can't afford to give reason for him to start more trouble. If Mephibosheth he can't have a potential traitor in his own palace. Smooth things over by making sure both are given ample land in the deal and don't make any rash accusations that might not be accurate.

Shimei: Shimei comes along with a large group of Benjaminites. This is the man who cursed David and threw rocks at him as David made his escape from the city. Now he is begging for his life. David's victory to him would be terrifying. He's reared his head as a dissident and with Absalom gone he's afraid to be at the top of David's list of enemies.

Once again, David can't risk offending a tribe. Could he execute Shimei? Certainly. Abisha, Joab's brother, in keeping with his own record of knee jerk violence, wants to kill the man. David says "no". Enough death has happened and he's king. Killing Shimei wouldn't make that any different nor any better. In fact, doing so might anger the tribe of Benjamin. He's just had to fight for his life for the throne. Israel is tender as it is, why make it potentially worse by unnecessarily offending an entire tribe out of petty vengeance?

The personal move would be to take revenge. The petty move would be to take Shimei's life. The wiser route as king would seem to be to show mercy in an effort to mend the wounds of Israel.

Barzillai: Finally we see David's gratitude in full force. Barzillai had used his wealth to serve David and his men prior to the battle. His generosity gave the men food for strength and provision for rest. The offer is made to now care for the aged Barzillai in Jerusalem. Barzillai is old enough that he knows his days are numbered. He wants to peacefully pass in his own town and home but requests his gift be given to his younger kinsman. David agrees and is good to his word.

The message? Serve the king and the king will reward you. The king can be trusted to show kindness to those who show kindness to him. Again, another politically smart move to help bring the tribes together under a single king.

All of this is well and good, but the division in the nation has already begun. Judah was the last to want to welcome David back to Jerusalem, but when they are scolded for it by David they become the first to actually go out to meet him and usher him back into the city.

The rest of Israel is angry at this. Why should Judah get this honor? Don't they have more involved in the nation than one measly tribe? Shouldn't they have been given that honor?

This argument ends the chapter. David is restored to the throne of a kingdom that is tearing at itself. What began as a rift between father and son has become a rift driving a wedge through the entire nation. Sometimes bad judgment for a long enough time can create irreparable harm. Sadly this seems the case in Israel.