

29 March 2015

Inappropriate Behavior

Matthew 21:1-17

Rabbi Shmuel ben Azriel: Jesus! You! Man of Galilee! Come here! Are you deaf? Don't you hear your followers? Shouting and dancing and gyrating in unseemly ways? Throwing robes on the street as if you were a king? Singing the psalms and accompanying themselves with their own instruments? Waving palm branches in the air like lunatics? Is this any way to approach the Holy City of David and the Lord God's own temple? This is all very disturbing. It's all . . . it's all *inappropriate!*

I don't begrudge the people their fun. Indeed, I *enjoy* watching children play. But perhaps Galilee would be a better place for such hurly-burly, hmm? We have standards here. In the Holy City, there is a right way to sing to God – not in the dirty streets, and not in the coarse voices and vulgar instruments of the people. We have trained and dedicated musicians for that. They don't just whack at their instruments; they actually know how to play them. And while it's just precious that your followers can sing two lines of Psalm 118 over and over, the Levitical singers actually know the rest of the words. And, meaning no offense, they sing them better.

Another thing. When you shout and dance in the streets like this, you're sort of opening things up to the wrong people. You know, you can't always tell a gentile by looks. What if an Idumean was in that crowd? Does it honor God by bringing in the scuff and raff of the gentiles to our worship? People who don't believe in one God? People who don't keep the commandments? Who eat pork and work on the Sabbath? Tax-collectors? Prostitutes? Don't you believe that God is holy? And another thing: how do you propose to keep men and women separate in your street rally? I'm willing to believe that you meant well, but clearly you haven't thought this through.

There are reasons for our traditions. There are reasons for our liturgies. There are reasons for our rules regarding behavior in worship. And there are reasons that we priests and Levites are in control. We know what the writings say. We know what our ancestors taught. We've been trained and had hands laid on us and have been approved for this task. Please, Jesus, leave worship to the professionals. Here, we do things decently and in order and without importing new practices willy-nilly. Send your followers back to Galilee to dance. Their exuberance is unacceptable in this holy place. Their behavior is inappropriate.

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Matthew 21:1-17. *When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.'* This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

*'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'*

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

*'Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'*

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' 11The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.' Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written,

*"My house shall be called a house of prayer";
but you are making it a den of robbers.'*

The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David', they became angry and said to him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read,

*"Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies
you have prepared praise for yourself"?"*

He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

There is nothing wrong with careful, regular, orderly liturgical worship. There is nothing wrong with following a familiar pattern in worship each week and nothing wrong with maintaining control over those liturgies. Indeed, there are very good reasons for doing so. For starters, the pattern of liturgy keeps worship from being hijacked by individuals calling attention to themselves. It's worth noting that churches that carefully follow ancient patterns tend not to have rock star pastors with lucrative TV contracts and luxury jets. They just don't leave space for that kind of egotism. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul warns the church at Corinth about this. Don't let individuals take over the service by speaking in tongues and making it about them; let all be done "decently and in order." Second, following liturgy keeps worship from becoming emotionally manipulative. There *are* some worship styles that are designed specifically to stir up emotions and evoke tears – which can feel very cleansing and meaningful, if you're fourteen – but emotions that are roused in the space of an hour dissipate just as quickly. Surely worship should be more than a brief weekly emotional fix. And finally, when worship is regular, patterned, and familiar it can leave space for the worshiper to let go of her or his conscious mind and simply experience God in the silences, between the measured steps of the well-worn liturgy.

Some of you, I know, agree with this. Just last week I asked one of our members who usually attends the 8:00 morning chapel service why she had been at the 10:00 service recently. She replied that while she loves the informal family atmosphere of the Morning Chapel, she attends the larger service during Lent and Advent because she also loves the formal liturgy. She's not alone. One of the fascinating small patterns of 21st century Christianity is the number of young adult Christians who are leaving their parents' evangelical churches and going to Catholic or Episcopal congregations. I've read several of their explanations for this move, and it's largely about liturgy. They seem to be saying, "I'm sick of being marketed to. I'm tired of being invited to services designed around what demographic research says my generation likes. I don't want a worship service that's all about me, but one that's about God. The ancient liturgies have been around for over a thousand years, and they'll still be here after I'm gone. I want to be a part of something that stable, something that doesn't care about the latest church fashion." So liturgy is good. Liturgy and ritual and ancient sacrament are not just ruts that the church falls into; they are the paths that the church has made for our faith journey through the wilderness.

But . . . having said that, liturgy and ritual do bring their own baggage on that journey. Anything that follows an orderly pattern can become meaningless as people just go through the motions without paying attention to what they're doing. And in a church, anything that's been done the same way for longer than six months can become a sacred cow, a holy tradition that must never be changed, and people can start to feel that the liturgy *itself* is what matters, and not the encounter with God it is supposed to foster. Moreover, when liturgy becomes complex, that inevitably leads to the creation of a separate class of elite specialists – priests, Levites, professional musicians, ordained clergy – who are given particular status and unique powers and are set above the *common* worshipers. It starts out as just needing trained people who know how to do everything according to the complex tradition, but too often it becomes a status thing, which is why so many of us are so incredibly pompous. But the greatest drawback of liturgy, I believe, is that we human beings learn best and grow most when our equilibrium is disturbed. If in our worship we *never* shake things up, never do anything surprising, never step out of our comfort zone, we are that much less likely to grow.

So now we go back to the story. The children lead the way as the people of Jerusalem shout and wave palm branches and chant a few lines of Psalm 118 – “Hosheanna! Lord, save us! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” – and cause a disturbance right in the middle of the Holy City, just a few days before Passover, the holiest festival of all. The priests are affronted. They already didn't like Jesus, because people were turning to him for their teaching and threatening their exalted status as the sole arbiters of all things faith. So they complain about the noise. “Tell your followers to pipe down. This is disrespectful. This is completely inappropriate!”

And Jesus replies something like this: “Really? Noise? You're the people who have set up concession stands in the temple courts and are making a killing exchanging foreign currencies for a fee, and you think a little noise is inappropriate behavior? Sometimes, you know, you need to shout. Sometimes you need to do something different, even a little wild – maybe dance a little, maybe bang some sticks together, maybe use an outside voice indoors, maybe track mud on the carpets and *not worry about it*. Don't you think God's worth making some noise over?”

“And do the kids bother you? Think they should be kept out of sight, or seen and not heard? Haven't you ever read Psalm 8, where David says, ‘Out of the mouths of babes and infants God has ordained praise’? Maybe these children know something that you've forgotten. You should listen to their noise. They have a lot to teach you.”

My cousin Scott in Oklahoma has a toddler at home, named Sam. A few months ago, Scott told Sam it was bedtime, and Sam resisted. Maybe some of you are familiar with that scene. But Scott persisted, which frustrated Sam so much that he burst out: “No! It's not bedtime! I have more silliness to do!” Well, it turned out that it *was* bedtime, after all. But we can still learn from Sam. We follow our liturgies, even learn to love them, but every now and then, we have more silliness to do. Thank God.