

Giving It Up: Enemies Sunday, 3/26/17

1 In 70 AD, the Roman army, led by General Titus (later to become Emperor) destroyed the city of Jerusalem and razed the Temple after a four year Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire. Much of what we know about this event is from the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, reported here from the website Josephus.org (there's an app or a web site for everything apparently!) Let's take some time to imagination what this battle looked like. Remember that this was before the Tomahawk Cruise Missile, so the siege of a city was waged in person, with spears, arrows, earthen ramps, siege towers, battering rams, and tunnels. If you've watched the Lord of the Rings movies, it was probably similar to one of those sieges, but without the magic and the monsters. After four years of repeated assaults, Jews within the walls of Jerusalem began to starve to death. Those caught trying to escape the city were captured and crucified in full view of the city, a number that reached as many as 500 a day and according to Josephus, "So great was their number, that space could not be found for the crosses nor crosses for the bodies." Later, it was discovered that some of the people fleeing Jerusalem had swallowed gold coins. When those laying siege to the city learned of it, they began cutting open the deserters, looking for gold plunder. Eventually the Temple itself was sacked and burned. General Titus is reported to have said, "'You would indeed have thought that the Temple-hill was boiling over from its base, being everywhere one mass of flame, yet the stream of blood was more copious than the flames.'" Josephus further reports that at the time of its destruction, Jerusalem was filled with Jewish pilgrims who had come to celebrate the annual Passover at the Temple. While the number killed in the siege is disputed, it was certainly in the hundreds of thousands.

According to Christianity Today, "The temple's sad end slammed the door on the Jew's sacrificial system. They adjusted, of course, creating new rituals for home and synagogue. ...Where were the Christians? Out of town, basically. Many had been driven out of Jerusalem by persecution decades earlier. Eusebius wrote that when the revolt began, in A.D. 66, some of the remaining Jewish Christians fled to Pella, a city across the Jordan River."

Think of it! This is Zion, the Holy City and Temple, the dwelling place of God, the same place that the Christian Church was born when the Holy Spirit descended on Pentecost.

All those churches you see with the word Zion in it, like Hanover Zion United Methodist Church- that's where the word Zion came from. The city was looted, burned, and razed to the ground. This is the context of our next Scripture reading, which took place approximately forty years before the destruction of Jerusalem. As we continue with our Lenten worship series, *Giving It Up*, we rethink what it means to give up our enemies. Incidentally, the following account is recorded by Luke alone of all the Gospel writers. I'm reading from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 19, verses 37-44. **{Read Luke 19:37-44, NLT}**

2 Jesus wept. That simple phrase ought to grab our attention. Only two times in the Gospels, once in John and once in Luke, is Jesus recorded as crying in public, although Paul implies that Jesus was no stranger to tears when he writes in Hebrews 5:7, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears..." The first instance of Jesus crying is found in John 11, where Jesus wept for his dead friend Lazarus. Even though he knew that the Father was about to raise Lazarus from the tomb, the humanity in Jesus could not but respond to the raw grief of the moment. Can you relate- emotionally, with your gut, what that's like to cry over the loss of someone dear to you?

But Luke's account of Jesus crying is somehow different. He's crying not for the loss of a dead friend. He's not even crying because of the painful crucifixion that awaits him after he enters the city. He's crying for Jerusalem. This one is a little harder to relate to, and I think that's because of who we think of as enemies in these stories. When Lazarus died in John 11, the clear enemy was death. If you can't appreciate death as your enemy, you'll have a hard time understanding that the Easter resurrection is good news. But as Luke records the movement of Jesus as he prepares to enter Jerusalem for the last time, the picture gets a little muddy for us. For so much of the Gospel accounts, it's the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the Jewish religious establishment that are painted as the enemies. Even the Roman occupiers, the same ones who would forty years later sack Jerusalem, are treated rather blandly in the Gospels, but the scheming Jewish leaders are indicted repeatedly for their hypocrisy and harm to their flock. As Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, we're called to look more carefully and broadly at who his enemies really are.

3 We know that at one level, the quarrelling, bumbling disciples of Jesus are his enemies, entering Jerusalem right along with Jesus. Recall the time in Matthew 16 when

Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” Or how about the times Jesus caught the disciples quarrelling about which of them would be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? Looking ahead to Holy Week, it was his disciple Judas who betrayed Jesus into the hands of the Jewish rulers. It was all his disciples who deserted Jesus when he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was Peter, who denied that he knew Jesus, not once but three times. In a sense, we’re each invited to identify with these ignorant, imperfect, often childish followers of Jesus. Enemies of Jesus in thought and deed in so many ways.

4 And then there were the Pharisees and Sadducees, hypocrites that majored in the minors and led the children of Israel to damnation. Jerusalem was their headquarters, site of the Temple and seat of their religious authority. Certainly, Jesus was weeping for them. We’re all invited to identify with these enemies of Jesus, although as a Pastor, I find myself in an especially uncomfortable proximity to these figures in the Gospels. How can anyone claim to be a teacher and not experience the tension between lifting the light of the Gospel in word and the need to exemplify those words in action. Hypocrisy comes especially easy to teachers, but it’s also a human condition that none of us are complete strangers to. So, in this way at least, we are also the enemies of Jesus, hypocrites one and all.

5 As I said, the Roman occupiers of Jerusalem get painted with a relatively bland brush in the Gospels, that is until we reach Holy Week. As Jesus prepared to enter Jerusalem, one of the enemies awaiting him was Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea. If you recall the map from last week, Judea was the Roman province where Jerusalem was located. It was Pilate who ordered that Jesus be flogged and crucified to appease the crowd that had been whipped into a frenzy by the chief priests. Pilate was afraid of the crowds, so he used his authority to kill an innocent man. None of us have the authority to order someone killed, but we all do have authority in different ways, whether it’s the authority to hire and fire, the authority to spend other people’s money, or even the authority to discipline a child. Who of us can say that we’ve always used that authority in a way that pleases God? When we misuse our God-given authority, we join Pontius Pilate in becoming an enemy of Jesus.

6 When Jesus wept over Jerusalem, was he weeping for us then? The short answer is

“that depends.” The long answer is that Jesus wept for all those in the city who had hardened their hearts to his announcement that the Kingdom of Heaven was near. Probably that included the Pharisees that dogged him on the road and insisted that his disciples be quiet rather than praise God, although we can’t really know for sure because none of us get to stand in the place of Jesus on the last day, separating the sheep from the goats.

Jesus echoes a familiar refrain here as he weeps over Jerusalem, following in the tradition of the many prophets who came before him, announcing God’s judgment on the people of Israel who had eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear. Isaiah said it in this way in a parable about God’s vineyard: “Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled.” (Isaiah 5:5) There is a poignant play on words here in versus 42, as Jesus cries out, “I wish that even today you would find the way of peace. But now it is too late, and peace is hidden from you.” The second part of the Hebrew name for Jerusalem is similar in form to the word we translate as shalom, or peace. How ironic that it is the City of Peace that is handed a final judgement of destruction by Jesus and, forty years later, is obliterated by the Roman Empire!

7 You may know that Shalom had broad and varied meaning, just as the word “peace” does today. In general, it means completeness, wholeness, and not just a cessation of hostilities. What Jesus offered to Israel, and what Jesus offers us today, is shalom. This is what he was getting at when he gave us the commandment to love our enemies. To love our enemies in terms of shalom is not only to avoid them in the street or hallway so you’re not tempted to punch them in the face. To love your enemies is to pray for them and serve them in a way that restores wholeness to their lives. Jesus loved each of us in that way when, despite the foolish and selfish ways we often act as we try to follow in his footsteps and fail, he laid down his life for us, that we might be transformed from enemies of God into children of God. And that, friends, is the secret to giving up our enemies. It’s only when we know in a profound way that we have been accepted by God, not for who we are but for who Jesus is, that we can offer shalom to our enemies. The shalom of Jesus can make us children of God. The shalom of Jesus can transform our enemies into friends.

8 Jesus was heartbroken for the people of Jerusalem, and for the people of Israel, knowing that so many had missed their only opportunity for true peace. He wept for them with the anguish of a parent. On an earlier trip to Jerusalem, recounted in Luke 13:34, Jesus lamented, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” Jesus cries out today for each of us as well when we choose to harden our hearts instead of yielding them to the Spirit of God, when we choose to be enemies of Jesus rather than children of God. Today we have an opportunity, each one of us, to start again, to leave our sin in the past, turn around, and follow Jesus more closely. Now is the opportunity to receive the shalom of Jesus, if only we’ll repent and join in the coming Kingdom of Heaven.

I wonder who else Jesus might be weeping for today. Who might there be in your life who is living without the shalom of Jesus? We know there is strife and famine in faraway places, and we faithfully pray for those people and situations, sending material support and occasionally going there ourselves as ambassadors of Christ. That is one way for us to be instruments of peace. But there are also people closer to us: family members, neighbors, and coworkers, who don’t have the shalom of Jesus. Some of them are our enemies and some of them are our friends. Jesus is crying for them all. Are you willing to allow God to soften your heart and grow your compassion for these lost sheep? Are you willing to bring them a new opportunity to be embraced as children of God? Are you willing to reach out to them, living your faith out loud, shining like a city on a hill? Look around the sanctuary this morning. Who’s missing that you haven’t seen in a while? Is there someone you could reach out to with the shalom of Christ, encouraging them to rejoin us in our worship of the King of Peace?

Please pray with me. *Lord God, forgive us for our thoughts and actions that make us your enemies. Thank you for your healing peace, that miraculously changes us from the inside out. How great is your love, that we should be called Children of God! Lead us and empower us to offer your shalom to all people. Melt our hearts and fill us with your compassionate love. Amen.*



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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