

“Yes. Prayer Is The Weapon For Warfare”
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Mark 11:1-11

Today is the beginning of Holy Week. Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter demonstrate the comprehensive nature of God’s justice and love for humanity in and through Jesus Christ.

It was twenty-eight years ago today that the Rev. Dr. Nico Smith from South Africa preached from my pulpit at La Crescenta Presbyterian Church in La Crescenta, California. In the spring of 1985, Nico Smith shocked many people when as a white man, an Afrikaner, a university professor, good standing as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, and a comfortable home moved with his wife Ellen to the South African township of Mamelodi. He had been taught to regard black people as an inferior race. But at the height of his career, Nico needed to reconcile the policies of apartheid with the gospel’s command to love your neighbor as yourself. He was the first white minister to declare that apartheid was wrong. Nico was obedient to the gospel of Jesus Christ where there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female for all are one in Christ. Nico’s pilgrimage for justice cost him friends, status, and respectability.

Palm Sunday. Jesus was five days away from his death. He felt it and wrestled with his fate. Jesus knew the Father’s will. He was sent to love people, heal people, teach people, dine with people, confront people, befriend people, include people, and die for people. Jesus was obedient to the will of God; the way of God, a way which is inclusive, welcoming, and hospitable; a way which is just. Regarding the significance of obedience when it comes to justice John M. Perkins writes,

If we believe That God’s vision for the church is one unified body, loving one another with the same love that Jesus and the Father shared, then we must acknowledge that the Enemy has been hard at work to destroy that vision. If we didn’t know the end of the story this could be discouraging, depressing news. But we know that in the end God wins. His purposes prevail. We will be the church that God intended from eternity past. That’s good news.¹

Do you want to be the church intended from eternity past? How you process being a congregation committed to vitality, dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty is the key to being church the way God intends.

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 and Mark 11:1-11 proclaim offering thanksgiving in worship for God’s entry into human experience. Offering thanksgiving in worship, for God’s faithful and never-ending love entering human experience, is always appropriate.

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 proclaims the king’s entry. Yes, the king of Israel but also the king who will come from the line of David, Jesus Christ our Lord. Psalm 118:26 reads “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.” The psalmist proclaims gratitude for the never ending radical and inclusive love of God. God is faithful to individuals and the whole community.

Mark 11:11-11 focuses on the just and inclusive message of Jesus. When Jesus entered Jerusalem the crowd hailed, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna” is the Hebrew for “O Lord, grant salvation.” Jerusalem is not just any city. It is the city of God and the faithless city, the city of hope and the city of oppression, the city of joy and the city of pain.² The crowd was prepared to hail the king. The crowd was ready to overtake its oppressor and establish the new reign of God on

¹John M. Perkins, *One Blood* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 2018), 143.

²Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 5.

earth. The crowd was ready to correct severe human rights violations. Unfortunately, the crowd's approach for justice was "inherently individualistic and possessive."³ Most significantly, justice is about the "us." Individuals experiencing justice move closer to an understanding and experience of God's love. And these individuals create better communities and a healthier society. Jesus turned upside down the people's expectations of human rights, justice, and a king. Jesus' way of coming into Jerusalem was welcoming and inviting to those who were marginalized and "kicked aside." Mark 11:11 reads, "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." As Jesus walked out of the temple, any hopes that the people had of a "take-over" king came to an end. Going to Bethany was a secluded time for reflection and prayer.⁴

Say YES to prayer. Again, John M. Perkins writes,

The prayer that Jesus taught His disciples encouraged them to pray that His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. His will is for reconciliation within the church. His prayer...His heart's desire is that we are one just as He and the Father are one. His will is for one Church that crosses ethnic, cultural, and class lines, and is focused on bring Him glory until He returns to redeem His bride.⁵

Like Jesus, we need to pray. Individual and corporate prayer cuts through the darkness, the warfare, brought on by the evil one. A journey of considerable prayer began for me twenty-eight years ago as I listened to Nico's sermon. And the journey continues today. Nico was a man of deep faith and prayer. Nico Smith proclaimed that the sign of a

³Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), 3.

⁴In the three paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Erik T. Myers, Audrey West and Cynthia L. Rigby in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 107-109, 110-112 and 112-113.

⁵John M. Perkins, *One Blood*, 150-151.

healthy church is to preach the gospel so radically that some people would stop coming to the church. Nico's message was about radical inclusivity. Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem indicated justice would be accomplished. What began at his baptism would find its completion in the resurrection. Justice is accomplished through radical inclusion.

The Jesus in Mark should inspire us to live into the fullness of who God created us to be. On this Palm Sunday, the Matthew 25 initiative of the Presbyterian Church (USA) sets Holy Week in its correct context. Be reminded that building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty is at the center of radical inclusion and justice. Pray. Prayer is our weapon to defeat the darkness of the evil one, who is the author of exclusion and injustice. My friends, say yes to prayer. Let's be a praying people who in word and deed proclaim the radical inclusion and justice of God. Amen.

*This sermon was preached (Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Palm Sunday, 28 March 2021
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