

We were winding through the city on a narrow road. The tour bus was just about the width of the road and lining the road were piles and piles of garbage, some broken down vehicles with no wheels and rusted out rims; wire re-rod twisted and embedded within mounds of broken stone - perhaps once part of someone's home. There was an occasional person or two standing a short distance from the heap or trash... staring out into the distance with deep, sullen eyes and a face that was weathered, and wrinkled. Perhaps from this geographical description, you may think we were deep in the hills of Appalachia. Where people, living on the margins of society, rarely participate in the benefits of "trash pick-up." But no..this place...this place, is a city called Jerusalem.

The first time I was in the Holy Land, I stood on top of the Mount of Olives and looked out over...Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city where prophets were killed and stoned to death. A place where empire and powerful religious leaders hung out and kept rigid religious laws and kept a keen eye out for people not keeping the laws. A place where the powers-that-be cast doubt upon anyone who had a reputation for performing acts of kindness, healing people or casting out demons.

My first journey through Jerusalem and up to the Mount of Olives had such an impact on me. It was a place I read about in my picture Bibles as a child. A place where cobblestone streets showed merchants selling their goods and where Jesus rode into with palm branches lining the streets and people singing "Hosana!" and where Jesus carried a cross... And in our gospel lesson from Luke, this place, Jerusalem, has an impact on me once again because it's where Jesus is headed today.

You see, Jesus is getting close to the cross, close to the place where he will be killed. Close to the place that will condemn him for doing good. So my question today is, "Why would anyone feel threatened by someone who is healing the sick, freeing those suffering from mental illness, or speaking of unconditional love? Why would love cause such a stir among religious officials, leaders of the empire and some people in the crowd?"

But love and kindness, the kind that Jesus was teaching, was frightening to some people, especially those who thought they would lose their grip on power - or fearful of losing their job. Herod Antipas, the governor of four areas in Galilee, was one of those fearful of

losing his grip over this itinerant preacher and teacher. And the Pharisees, those in high religious stance, they are leary of his mission, too, and come to do Herod's bidding - to warn Jesus that this might not turn out so well if he keeps doing what he's doing... loving those most in need of love. But love speaks and acts in typical Jesus fashion, and he tells the Pharisees to go back to Herod and tell "that fox" his work is not done, yet. Jesus says he's not done healing the sick and tending to the people's deepest needs.

"But when I am done," Jesus says, "I'll leave - but in my own sweet time." So this brings me to another question, "Who's in charge here? The powerful? Or... Love?"

And you gotta love it when Jesus calls Herod a "fox." He may be implying that Herod is a deceptive or clever person, or perhaps both. Because when Jesus calls Herod "that fox," he's not paying Herod a compliment. No, in actuality, Jesus is insulting him - for a fox was an unclean animal in the Israelite holiness codes. Jesus thought Herod fit to be insulted in such a way because although Herod often tried to appear the pious Jewish leader, he had more than a few problems maintaining the loyalty of his Jewish subjects. Love, here, takes a stand and unveils the truth. Why were the chief priests, and the Roman authorities and the mobs of people so determined on destroying the one who is the embodiment of love? Why is love such a threat?

*"How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing to be nurtured or loved."*

What a great visual of God's love for his children. This image of God is especially comforting to me when I need to be loved and sheltered. Sheltered from danger and those who set out to harm the most vulnerable. Shelter from oppressive rigidness bent on keeping people in poverty and suppressing their freedom. Or sheltered and loved in spite of our *own* messiness, mishaps and mis-guided words and deeds. So who wouldn't want to be loved like this? Who wouldn't want to be taken under the wing of the One who loves us... no matter what? Loved unconditionally with all our insecurities, shortcomings?

But sometimes I think, and perhaps you may have pondered this, too, love at times has a funny way of offending people or making them feel uncomfortable. And, and trust me, it's painful when someone you love - doesn't feel worthy of that love. It's that "place" of heartache for both the lover - the one extending the love - and the one being loved. Perhaps due to the

fact that love isn't always about the "good stuff." The "stuff" that reinforces a person's self-reliance or dismisses bad behavior. Love, you see, is about telling the truth and the truth can be harsh to hear at times. Jesus didn't always tell people what they wanted to hear. He didn't sugarcoat what it means to "take up your cross and follow him." He spoke about a new way to live, a new way to love and a new world order where rampant control over others less fortunate does not reign. Love *is* hard at times. Helping others who are not in a good place isn't always easy or convenient regardless if their situation is from no fault of their own or maybe self-inflicted. Standing in the gap for those being harassed and persecuted because of where they live, what they look like, what language they speak requires vulnerability and courage on our part.

The apostle Paul, today, in his address to the Christian community in Galatia, tells those who are dismissing the Gentiles as outsiders and creating havoc by using the rigid food laws and circumcision as their basis for who's in and who's out, to (in the words of Bill Uetricht) knock it off! Our citizenship, our belonging, is *not* from the earthly realm. We are citizens of something much greater than anything we create or anyone we elevate to laud the law over us...we are citizens who stand firm in the love of Christ. So act like it, Paul says. Not only in words, but deeds. Somehow, I get the feeling that the place of our citizenship, the place that matters the most...isn't really a "place" at all...but love. Love is in charge here because we are imitators of Christ and that, is our birthright.

Today, tomorrow and the next day, indicates time in general in the gospel passage today. The "next day" specifically takes on the meaning 'in a short time'. Jesus will leave the region in Galilee but in his own time. Jesus is in charge as he begins his journey toward Jerusalem - cleaning the streets where heaps of hatred were spewed toward the most vulnerable. And even with the road to the cross in his future, Jesus wasn't done speaking of a world where peace, not violence rules the masses. I surmise he is still not done...teaching and showing us, too.

Jesus' mission *keeps* speaking of a world where the have nots - will have, the left out - are in, the imprisoned - set free, the oppressed - sprung out from under their oppressors, the sick - are healthy, the mentally ill - find wholeness, the starving children eat their fill and laugh again, the ashes of war - rise to house families again, the mighty and powerful...are weak.

Muskegon, Muskegon. America, America. Israel, Israel. Gaza, Gaza. Palestine, Palestine. Ukraine, Ukraine. Russia, Russia. Sudan, Sudan. Places where forgiveness, mercy and grace line the streets and the tired, worn out and withered faces from a lifetime of hardship will find a place of love and acceptance. Yes, place matters...but people matter more.

Oh, Jesus. Gather us together again. Gather your children together under your wing of safety and security. And...Inshallah...God-willing, I will travel the winding roads through Jerusalem again. And I will remember the words of Jesus as he looked out over the city and said, Jerusalem, my Jerusalem. Can't you just feel the pain and ache in Jesus' heart? But honestly, I'm tired of lamenting over Jerusalem. I'm tired of lamenting over racism and gender equality. I'm tired of lamenting over children starving and children used for gain. I'm tired of lamenting families living in fear, detention centers, broken relationships, marriages and the messiness of the world.

But we *are* in *this* place...now. And it matters. So who's in charge? *"Look toward heaven, Abraham, and count the stars, if you are able to count them?"*

"Look toward heaven, Paula, and count the stars...if I am able to count them. Look toward heaven First Lutheran, and count the stars...if we are able to count them.' So who's in charge? We are on our way today, tomorrow and the next day... to the place called Jerusalem...we are on our way to the place called... love. Amen.