

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

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Ezekiel 36:22-28

Luke 22:39-53

## WHAT JESUS REJECTS AND EMBRACES: WORKING FOR CHANGE

We are a part of the church of Jesus Christ. As his followers, we look to see where he goes before us in order to follow him. But we live in confusing times, when parts of the church seem to mischaracterize who Jesus is. If we are to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, we need to know him, that we might discern how to follow him in the challenging times in which we live. Most of the time, I preach from suggested scripture readings that go along with the liturgical year. But over these seven weeks between now and the beginning of Advent, I invite you to look closely with me at what the gospel accounts tell us that Jesus rejects and what he embraces so we might be more faithful in following him and continuing his ministry in our day and age.

More of my focus when looking at Jesus has been on what he embraces. Yet, what is to be rejected has to be part of the equation also. As followers of Jesus Christ, among the vows taken in the sacrament of baptism, is this question: 'Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you renounce evil and its power in the world?' What does Jesus reject or renounce in order to make way for what he would embrace? Today we consider what Jesus rejects and embraces in the process of working for change.

Our reading from Luke today comes in between what might be normal Maundy Thursday and Good Friday readings. After Jesus has had his last supper with his followers, he leads them to the base of the Mount of Olives, identified elsewhere as the Garden of Gethsemane, where he would pray about God's will, and then would be arrested, which would lead to his crucifixion.

The first thing we hear about Jesus working for change in this passage is surprisingly working for a change within himself. The initial thing he rejects in this account are his own narrow interests. Like any human being, Jesus wanted to avoid the suffering that would lie ahead for him. But instead of pursuing his own

interests by running away and hiding from those who would arrest and kill him, he fervently prays for God's will and the courage to do what would be best for all involved. In working for change, he asks first for a change in his own heart so he could be open to embrace God's will for him and for all. In our own selfish focus on our own wants and whims, our hearts can get hardened to the needs of others. However, in our reading from Ezekiel, we hear that God can change hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. As followers of Jesus Christ, among the things we are called to reject is the pursuit of just our own narrow interests without regard for what are the needs of all.

Jesus also rejects the possibility of imposing his will upon the will of others. He asks for, but does not force his disciples to stay awake with him while he prays. He does not coerce the one who betrays him or those who come to arrest him in a way so that they must do what he says for them to do. Our Lord gives us a significant amount of free choice. We can choose ways which lead to darkness for ourselves and for others, but by God's grace, we also have more positive choices. God gives us ability to make choices. Among the things Jesus rejects is forcing people to do what he desires for us and others to do.

When Jesus had come into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, there seemed to be those who hoped he would lead a military uprising against the Roman forces that oppressed them. Instead, he rode into the city on a donkey – a sign of a ruler who comes in peace. Again, in today's reading from Luke, we hear of the one time when one of Jesus' followers uses violence to try to change what is going on. Judas betrays Jesus and leads the temple police to where they could arrest him, but his other followers ask whether to use a sword to resist. Without waiting for an answer, one of the disciples strikes at a slave of the high priest and cuts off his ear. But Jesus rejects this use of violence, even in his defense. He had taught love for one's enemies, and here he demonstrates that by not only rejecting the use of violent force to bring about a change, but by also healing the ear of the one who had been injured.

Through the centuries, the church has struggled long and hard about whether it is ever appropriate to use violent force to effect change. Augustine was a fourth century church leader who was instrumental in developing the just war theory,

taking seriously the question of how to limit the times when violent force is used. There are differences in when the fighting is between individuals and between nations. In a world of aggressors who threaten innocent people even with nuclear weapons, these are difficult issues for people of faith. Yet, when we are inclined to use violent force, we should at least be asking our Lord for guidance and waiting for an answer before doing so. And Jesus sets the challenging example of seeking and enabling wholeness even for one who comes at us as an enemy.

The witness of the church is weakened when it says one thing and does something else as it works for change. There are parts of the church that seem to think that the ends can justify the means, so it uses methodologies in working for change that appear to be hypocritical because they are hypocritical. Jesus shows the integrity of his faith, based in trusting that God has a greater plan, even when that divine purpose is hard to see when we are in the midst of events. In offering us guidance as his followers, as Jesus works for change, we hear him reject his own narrow interests, reject an inclination to force his will upon others, and reject the use of violent force to bring about that change. What he does not reject is any of the people involved who are trying to stand with him or those who are standing against him.

As a result, we see Jesus embracing a method of working for change that opens the way toward changing hearts and not just changing situations. He embraces God's transformative power to bring about internal and external changes. There are many needed changes in this day and age. Some of the needed changes reside within us as individuals or as a collective of those who say we want to be followers of Jesus Christ. As we grow in understanding who Jesus is as the One who goes before us, may our hearts be changed to truly desire God's will, and not just our own. We can rejoice that Christ does not give up on us as we seek to be more consistent in living out our faith as we work for the wholeness that God desires for all. Following Christ is quite the journey – I'm so thankful we can journey together as we seek to discern how best to be faithful in our following, even as we work for change within and beyond ourselves. Amen.

