

## ***Desire and Resistance***

Mark 11:1-10, 15:6-15  
Sermon by Dan Schrock  
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### **Mark 11:1-10 (NRSV)**

*When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples<sup>2</sup> and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"<sup>4</sup> They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, <sup>5</sup>some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?"<sup>6</sup> They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. <sup>7</sup>Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. <sup>8</sup>Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. <sup>9</sup>Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,*

*"Hosanna!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*<sup>10</sup>Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!"*

### **Mark 15:6-15 (NRSV)**

*<sup>6</sup>Now at the festival he [Pilate] used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. <sup>7</sup>Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. <sup>8</sup>So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. <sup>9</sup>Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" <sup>10</sup>For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. <sup>11</sup>But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. <sup>12</sup>Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" <sup>13</sup>They shouted back, "Crucify him!" <sup>14</sup>Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" <sup>15</sup>So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.*

## I

A regrettable part of Christianity is the deplorable way we Christians have sometimes treated Jews. Even we in the Anabaptist tradition have been guilty of a certain amount of anti-Semitism. For instance, a few years before he turned Anabaptist, Balthasar Hubmaier preached vigorously against Jews in the city of Regensburg where he was then living. Hubmaier called Jews blasphemers and mockers. His preaching against Jews riled up local Christians so much that they drove all Jews out of town. Hubmaier then had the Jewish synagogue in town destroyed and a Christian chapel built in its place. Even though Hubmaier was several years away from becoming an Anabaptist when this happened, it reveals an unsavory side of his character which leaves me ashamed.

Christian hatred of Jews started in the first century, shortly after the death of Jesus, when Christians started to blame Jews for killing Jesus. “Christ killer” became an epithet that Christians slung into the faces of Jews, as if all Jews who ever lived were weirdly and inexplicably responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion. Today we want to say as clearly as we can that Jews as a people were not, and are not, responsible for the death of Jesus. The people who worked together to kill Jesus were instead a tiny group. This small, localized group included some Judeans in and around Jerusalem, plus the local Roman ruler, Pontius Pilate. When Jesus died, there were hundreds of thousands of Jews living in other parts of the Mediterranean world. There were Jews up north in Galilee, Jews down in Alexandria, Egypt, and Jews over in Rome. None of them had anything to do with killing Jesus, and many of them had never even heard of Jesus. Even most Jews in Judea were not involved in killing Jesus. The people who collaborated to have Jesus killed consisted of a few religious leaders and a few political leaders. Yes, these leaders managed in the heat of the moment to manipulate what the gospel writers call “the crowd,” but New Testament scholars often say the crowd was probably more like several dozen or perhaps several hundred people, not thousands of people.

## II

A more compelling reason to stop blaming Jews for the death of Jesus comes from taking an honest look at ourselves. We have much in common with the crowd in today’s two stories. In the first story, the crowd loves Jesus. They shout. They dance. They sing. They demonstrate their allegiance to Jesus.

Contrast that with what they do in the second story, just a few days later. Later that same week, the crowd which sang praises to Jesus now wants to crucify him. They switch from embracing him to rejecting him, from honoring him to dissing him. Call them fickle and faithless if you want, but admit that we ourselves are also fickle and faithless with Jesus.

Think about it. There are times when you really desire Jesus. Maybe you’re lying on a gurney, getting ready for surgery, and you’re praying like mad for the mercy and

protection of Jesus so this operation doesn't go haywire. Or maybe you watch your daughter get in the car and drive away for her first long road trip, and with all your heart you plead with Jesus not to let her get into an accident. Or maybe you want to grow in intimacy with Jesus through prayer and meditation, through fellowship and service. Your deepest desire is to become more like Jesus by any means possible. In situations like these, you want Jesus more than anything else. With all your soul, you reach out to Jesus.

And then there are times when you reject Jesus. You don't want to have anything to do with him. Maybe you keep yourself busy so you don't have time to pray, which in turn means you don't have to deal with Jesus either. Staying busy can be a great way to resist Jesus. Or maybe you really aren't all that busy and you do have time for one or more spiritual practices, but . . . well . . . other things are mildly more interesting like streaming a movie, shopping on-line, scanning the posts on Facebook, or texting on your phone. It's innocent and innocuous stuff, really; nevertheless it can mean you never get around to something else Jesus might care more about.

All of us play this dance of desire and resistance. It's just part of the human condition. One day we want Jesus, but the next day we find a way to resist him. In one moment we lean toward him, but in the next moment we lean away from him. Oh yes, we have a lot in common with the crowd in Mark.

### III

Astute people notice that what most of us really want in life has to do with relationships. What really satisfies us more than money or power or fame is a set of good relationships. Our life is most fulfilling when we have close friends, neighbors, and family. Intimacy is what gratifies us over the long run. We're a decidedly social species which needs other people to thrive.

Astute Christians go one step further to realize that even the best human relationships, as important as they are, cannot match intimacy with God. What our species craves more than anything else is a satisfying relationship with the Transcendent

Other who we call God. That is the mother of all desires, the one thing that can't be satisfied by anyone or anything else.

And yet we resist a relationship with intimacy with God. Author Janet Ruffing tells a story that illustrates our resistance to intimacy with God. One Saturday morning, a young twenty-something woman named Grace decided to pray for guidance about a decision she had to make. She went to her bedroom and started praying. While she prayed, her room was suddenly filled with light—more light than was coming through the windows from the sun. In that moment she felt deeply loved by God. However, this unexpected light in her bedroom and this unexpected sense of God's love scared her so much that she fled her room and pulled the door shut behind her. As Grace paced outside in the hallway, a friend noticed her and said, "I thought you said you were going to pray." Grace responded, "I did, and God is in my room right now!" When God appeared to her in a visceral, intimate way, Grace skedaddled as fast as she could to put distance between herself and God.<sup>1</sup>

There it is. We want God, but we also resist God.

#### IV

As the story of Grace illustrates, much of our resistance against God is unconscious and unintentional. It happens in the moment, almost without thought. Generally we don't roll out of bed in the morning scheming new ways to push God away. Our resistance pops up anyway. When we notice our own resistance, it helps simply to refocus and renew our desire for God. The best antidote to resistance is channeling our desire so that it runs toward God, not away from God.

Working with our desire for God and our resistances against God is a life-long project. The good news is that as we become more spiritually mature, our desire for God grows and our resistance against God diminishes. Our resistance may never completely go away, but things do get easier. As we mature, we will more often we want the same things God wants.

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<sup>1</sup> Janet K. Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings* (New York, Paulist, 2000), 37.

## V

When I watch how Jesus responded to people who embraced him one day and then pushed him away a few days later, I notice how non-anxious he remained. He stayed calm when the crowd praised him and he also stayed calm when the crowd wanted to crucify him. It's almost as if he expected this odd, contradictory behavior, and neither response was going to upset his inner gyroscope.

This suggests how enormously patient God is. God is with us in this enterprise for the long haul. God knows our nature and what we are made of. God might easily surprise us, as God surprised Grace when she went to pray in her bedroom, but virtually never do we surprise God. We can disappoint God, sure, but surprise God? No.

God is patient with us. Perhaps the best thing we can do is to keep aligning ourselves with God's own patience. In the middle of our various resistances, we can renew our wish for God. We can refocus our desire to live in line with God's own desires for intimacy and peace.