

FEELING MISUNDERSTOOD AND ALONE

Matthew 21: 1-16

One of the greatest humans of the 20th century is a man called Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer was a doctor and humanitarian who gave his life as a healer in a part of Africa now called Gabon. The work he began there continues to thrive today with a major research hospital and health centre. In 1952, Schweitzer was awarded one of the greatest recognitions in our world – the Nobel Peace Prize. He was awarded this prize not only for his incredible pioneering work as a doctor in a remote and neglected part of the world at the time. But also because he was a philosopher whose philosophy was focussed on reverencing life and all life. He was an environmentalist well before his time who argued for the infinite worth of all life, especially that of the most vulnerable, which included creatures of all kinds.

When people would go out to visit Dr. Schweitzer he would take them on tour through land and forest not only pointing out the beauty they could see all around, but also making them mindful of walking with care lest they harm the tiniest creatures less visible. All creation and the land itself were family.

Now if being a pioneering physician, philosopher and environmentalist were not enough, Schweitzer was also a brilliant musician, an organist and an authority on J.S. Bach, even authoring a biography of Bach that is still consulted today by musicologists. To raise money for his work in Africa he would play concerts throughout Europe and North America. In partnership with other renowned musicians of the time like Charles Marie Widor, Schweitzer published authoritative editions of Bach's Organ music and modelled a style of playing it closer to the original.

Finally, before becoming a doctor, Schweitzer was also a biblical scholar, theologian and ordained minister, who was rising up the ranks as a scholar in Europe. Well before becoming a doctor, Schweitzer was making a name for himself with his pioneering work on understanding the Jesus of the gospels and the apostle Paul. What made his understanding unique was that he was able to see past traditional western interpretations of Jesus and Paul, recognizing their Jewishness, their spirituality and in the case of Paul – his mysticism. Schweitzer continues to influence biblical scholarship today, and I must admit Schweitzer is one of the big influences on my thinking and spirituality too.

Anyhow, the reason I bring up Schweitzer to begin this sermon is that at the height of his career as a rising star in the European scholarly world, at the age of 30 years old, Schweitzer decided to take a major turn in his life to go to medical school. And why is that? He said that as a teenager he had made a vow to God. He would serve God with his mind till he was 30 years old. But then he would serve God more practically with his hands. Starting medical school at 30, he said, was hard work for his brain. It took him 10 years to get through medical school.

So where would this new adventure in Schweitzer's midlife take him? He says that he felt called to serve not in some major hospital in Europe. Rather, to follow Jesus for him meant going to where the need was greatest, a place where there was no western medicine at all. Schweitzer sought to go to the remotest part of the world he could get access to. At the time, this was a part of Africa no European had ever been. It was jungle and forest and the people who lived there had never seen a white person.

Well, how would he get there? There was a religious organization - a fundamentalist, evangelical one, which was able to offer access. Schweitzer was known as a liberal theologian. The organization needed a doctor ready for adventure, but they didn't trust Schweitzer's theology. Schweitzer promised them he would preach not with his mouth, but his hands. He was going out there to offer medical healing not evangelism. Finally and reluctantly, they agreed to accept Schweitzer, because they needed a doctor and nobody else was willing to give up their life to go where no one had been before. But they also had very little money to help Schweitzer get there. He would have to raise the money to make the trip himself. Can you imagine? Here is this renowned scholar humbling himself to go to a place no one else would dare to go, answerable to small-minded fundamentalists, and having to raise his own money to get there? What was he thinking?!

Well, Schweitzer started a campaign. He sold his house and all his things except essentials. He begged and borrowed from family and friends...

OK, but let's step back for a moment. We know in the end Schweitzer succeeded where few if any would, with a determination and perseverance that was truly heroic... but imagine what we would have thought at the time before he actually went off on his adventure... Would we have questioned what he was doing? Had he lost his mind? Was there some mental health breakdown that had caused him to take such a turn in his life and make such a decision? Was he delusional? Was he selfish and self-righteously egotistical with some deranged messiah complex? What was his real motivation? What was he trying to prove? Who was he trying to save?

In his biography Schweitzer says that this was one of the hardest, most tortured times in his life. Once he had come to clarity in his heart and soul before God, with a vision of Christ calling him to follow and the Spirit filling him with an excitement he had never felt the same before, he says that his family, friends and colleagues put up all kinds of roadblocks on his path. They grilled him and questioned him. They became angry with him. Family members wept and threatened to cut off all relations. Colleagues urged him to get psychiatric help as he was throwing away a brilliant career or several careers as a theologian, minister, and musician ready to take his careers to new heights! Even as a doctor and surgeon there were great opportunities in Europe. Was he caught in some primal guilt or shame that he was atoning for? Did he want to punish himself or his family? Did he hate himself or his culture or the western world of which he was a wonderfully brilliant representative? What was his problem?

Schweitzer says that he felt profoundly misunderstood and alone... He wept and he prayed and he struggled... No one would accept his honest and heartfelt explanation that he was simply following the call of Jesus. Even though he was part of Christian Europe, the idea that God may call someone to give up so much in order to find a different kind of fulfillment... This was so hard for people in his world of self-righteous privilege to understand... He was going not to evangelize or civilize Africans, but to serve them, according to their needs and their humanity as children of God... Was this so deranged? Wow!

Now the reason I bring up Schweitzer as an example, is to raise this question for ourselves as much as it is also a question for Jesus on this Palm Sunday. Have you ever felt misunderstood and alone? Have you ever felt that people have just not been willing to see you and accept you for who you are, but rather had their own theories and explanations about you, criticisms and accusations against you regardless of what you were thinking, feeling and expressing?

One of the most difficult things many of us have gone and may go through in life is not being understood, accepted and loved for who we are rather than who people want us to be or expect us to be. Do we have the courage to go it alone, to be authentically who we are, to accept that some people may turn their backs on us because we cannot sell our souls and be something we are not any longer? Anyone who has had to hide their culture, their background, their beliefs and values, their sexual or gender identity, the person they're supposed to love, to marry or stay married to, the career they're supposed to have, the kind of person they're supposed to be... Anyone one of us can understand what it's like to be misunderstood, criticized, rejected and alone.

Well, if we can get inside this experience and feel with Albert Schweitzer and anyone who has had to live falsely, pretend or go it alone cut off from family and one time friends... then we can also appreciate what Jesus is going through on Palm Sunday. Even though on the surface Jesus is being welcomed by the crowds with waving palm branches and loud shouts of "hosanna!", the truth is the leaders with the power and authority are viciously opposed to him and threatened by him. The crowds are easily controlled and dispersed and few of them are willing to risk punishment. Only the children seem genuinely sincere in appreciating Jesus for who he is, rather than who people expect him to be.

People expect the messiah to be a military leader with political power, one ready to use violence against their enemies. But who is the enemy? Sure the Romans are at the top of the list. But the authorities had turned people against each other too. The sick and poor were judged for being so. The leaders were all trying to undercut each other. They had spread their toxins of hate mixed in with lots of shaming, blaming and threatening to keep people down and ready to point fingers at each other... How could Jesus have a chance to change all that even if he was the Messiah of God? The Holy Spirit can transform like wind can spread a flame into a raging fire, but breaking through hearts closed super tight is another thing altogether. Without openness in a human spirit, God cannot heal or transform.

OK, so why does Jesus seem to push all the wrong buttons then? He talks of love and demonstrates a powerful compassion that heals, but love is also about justice and justice love is often expressed as protest and outrage. And so, Jesus goes all out publicly in the temple when the crowds have gathered for the greatest festival of the people – the Passover. Jews from all over the world have gathered in their capital city Jerusalem, the centre of which is the temple. Worship at the temple involves animal sacrifice. People buy livestock for this purpose. But all the revenue from such purchases funds an establishment which lives on greed, opulent wealth and brutal force suppressing all opposition. Even as they hate the Romans, the religious authorities need the Romans to help keep the peace and support them in their power and privilege. Compassion and justice are the last things they care about. Jesus is so angry he overturns the tables where exchange of money and livestock is happening. He disrupts worship during the most important time of the year. No surprise that this is the last straw for the authorities already bent on destroying him.

So what's Jesus' agenda then? What will be gained if he goes wild in public, pushes all the alert buttons against the authorities, publicly denouncing them and daring them to act? Is Jesus suicidal, or does he believe something will be achieved here? This is the story of Holy Week leading up to Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Jesus walks this journey very intentionally. What he stands for and is ready to die for is very clear. It is a compassion that is fiercely ready to forgive, but also ready to denounce in protest and outrage when the vulnerable creation of God is despised and mangled by the machinery of brutality inducing fear and shame on a traumatized people. Jesus is ready to fall on the sword of love because love is the only answer for any future worth having, and any hope for a people worthy of calling themselves the people of God.

So then, even as Good Friday may come as a shock to Jesus' followers, those of us bequeathed the gospel narrative are given a bird's eye view of what's happening and will inevitably happen. For all the cheers and imagined hopes on Palm Sunday, the crowds will easily turn on Jesus. The authorities are masters at twisting public opinion and providing an outlet for all the hate and despair. Jesus will pay. But does that make him a loser?

Is compassion ever a loser, whatever price it may pay? How you answer that question reveals where you are at with Jesus. For Albert Schweitzer the answer became crystal clear. Even if he had to give up everything, following Jesus even through Good Friday was the path to new life whatever such life would look like. Here's how Schweitzer ends his most famous book: "*The Quest for the Historical Jesus*": "He (that is: Jesus) comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old by the lakeside he came to those persons who knew him not. He speaks the same word: "Come, follow me!" and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time and place. He calls. And to those who follow him, whether they are wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, and the sufferings which they will pass through in his fellowship and, as an ineffable mystery, they will learn in their own experience who he is."

In this holy week, may you hear the call of Jesus, the call of Jesus to you in your life right now... May you experience anew who Jesus is to you and in you, and may you never feel misunderstood or alone with his Spirit in you... Amen.