

The Power of Parody
Luke 19:28-40, Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Palm Sunday
Woodbury UMC
April 10, 2022

I am curious if you could raise your hand if you were already aware that Winnie the Pooh is essentially banned in China, to the extent that the Chinese government went so far as to add ‘Winnie the Pooh’ to its internet search blacklist, because of this image. Raise your hand if you learned this from John Oliver or some other humor source rather than a conventional news source? That is most who had their hands up.

This image is from 2013, when Chinese president, Xi Jinping was making an official visit to the United States. Someone shared this image of him walking with President Obama alongside an image of Pooh and Tigger. A lot of people thought it was funny. He didn’t.

One year later, when President Jinping was meeting with Japan’s Shinzo Abe, someone posted another pic. The expression on his face really matches the Winnie the Pooh picture they have. And Eeyore? What more is there to say?

Chinese sensors blocked these memes, even blocked the station that broadcasts John Oliver’s TV show, which had aired pieces about the

lousy Chinese record on human rights, probably not a coincidence¹. For a government with so much power over its people and such control over its media, they sure seem upset by a little joke. One of my points is that you probably wouldn't have heard anything about this if they didn't get so upset.

Those of us of a certain age will remember Chevy Chase's impression of President Ford on Saturday Night Live. Ford was a well regarded athlete, one of the more athletic people we elected to that office—but once you saw Chevy's pratfalls and tripping all over the furniture in the White House, you could never see him the same way again. That's the way it is with parody and satire. When you see it, it can be difficult or impossible to see the one being parodied ever again without thinking of the joke made at their expense. Point being jokes can affect the powerful enough to cause real change.

Has anyone here ever watched John Oliver? How about the Daily Show when Jon Stewart was host? Or SNL's Weekend Update any time over the last 40 years? I'm guessing it's not a small number of you. In 2004, The Pew Research Center released a study that showed that 21% of people under age 30 said they regularly learned about the campaign and the candidates from comedy shows like "The Daily Show."² I looked for an update. By 2014, a full 12% of Americans named The Daily Show as the place where they got their news. Twelve percent may not seem

¹ China bans Winnie the Pooh film after comparisons to President Xi, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/07/china-bans-winnie-the-pooh-film-to-stop-comparisons-to-president-xi>

² 25 years of "The Daily Show": Here's 5 ways it permanently changed U.S. satire, <https://www.salon.com/2021/07/22/the-daily-show-25th-anniversary-changed-satire-news/>

like an overwhelming number until you consider that put The Daily Show right there with actual national news sources like USA Today (12%)³. When Walter Cronkite died in 2009, Jon Stewart was voted in an online poll by Time Magazine as "America's most trusted newscaster." It wasn't even close: Stewart carried 44% of the vote⁴. Point being, we've established that satire and parody have power, and that lampooning the powerful can have a very real effect on their power and how they are perceived by those whom they have power over.

All of this is to set the scene for the two processions entering Jerusalem on that long ago Palm Sunday. Had anyone heard about their being two processions on Palm Sunday, not just one? Prominent theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their book, The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem, make a pretty good argument that Jesus's was not the only triumphal entry into Jerusalem on that day, and the other one was intended to intimidate⁵. What Jesus did was to take the wind out of the intimidating one in a way that was impossible to ignore.

We know that Jesus and his followers were going to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover. And we know that Passover swelled Jerusalem's Jewish population from its usual 50,000 to at least 200,000. He would come in all of his imperial majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims that Rome is in charge. They could commemorate an ancient

³ As Jon Stewart steps down, 5 facts about The Daily Show, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/06/5-facts-daily-show/>

⁴ America's new most trusted man?, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2009-07-24-0907230838-story.html>

⁵ Parade or Protest?, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1708-parade-or-protest>

victory against Egypt if they wanted, but don't even think about challenging present-day Rome, because present-day Rome was watching, and they would happily crush you if you so much as looked at them sideways.

This is the background, Borg and Crossan argue, against which we need to frame the Triumphal Entry of Jesus. Pilate in all of his pomp enters Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approached from the east, looking ragtag. Borg and Crossan remark: His was the procession of the ridiculous, the powerless, and the explicitly vulnerable. They go on: "What we often call the triumphal entry was actually an anti-imperial, anti-triumphal one, a deliberate lampoon of the conquering emperor entering a city on horseback through gates opened in submission."

Two processions. Maybe it is a coincidence. Mark's gospel pretty compellingly suggests Jesus planned a counter-procession. Jesus knew he was going to enter the city on the back of a donkey; he had already made arrangements to procure one and create this situation. Of course, this is all with the benefit of hindsight. At the time, we are pretty sure that people wanted a revolution worthy of their worship, a revolution worthy of putting their dusty cloaks on the road. What they got instead was a donkey ride. A parade of misfits. New Testament scholar N.T Wright describes it, saying what they got was a mismatch between their outsized expectations and God's small answer.

There is no doubt that Jesus' political lampoon hastened his crucifixion. Jesus was no fool; he knew exactly what it would cost him

to thumb your nose at Roman power. He understood that humor at its best points unflinchingly to truths we'd rather not see, or that others would rather not have us see.

The power of the Emperor persuades by fear and intimidation. The power of Jesus was enough to persuade people that the Emperor was not the one with the real power. After all, real power doesn't need to keep enforcing its legitimacy. Jesus offered something new, a power that didn't depend on fear but was grounded in grace, and love of neighbor. With this procession, Jesus has the power to change how you see the priorities of this world. When you start to understand God's priorities, then the insistence of empire and the powers of this world on their own importance becomes ridiculous compared to God's priorities—the ultimate example of “the emperor has no clothes.”

In my research, there is something else I hadn't noticed before. Those of you who have been doing our Lenten Bible studies have noticed a pattern, that I keep saying to read everything about the selection, the more the better. If you do that, you will see a couple of things. For one, the ending of today's reading is a bit artificial. It goes right into Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, and then this compassionate, weeping Jesus goes into the temple and starts knocking things over, and then occupying the temple with those in the crowd who kept following him. This is a long narrative, and what we have today is just the beginning.

The other thing is that if you read earlier, you will see that some of those who had been following Jesus all this time appear to be Pharisees

who either were his disciples, or his followers, or at least sympathetic to Jesus. Go back to Luke 13:31: *At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me...* You remember that verse, it is a pretty cool thing for Jesus to say. Point being there were Pharisees here warning him against harm, and I think you have Pharisees warning him against harm again. When you get to today's reading it seems clear that the Pharisees know the great danger that Jesus is creating, and the ferocious consequences they are bringing on. The Pharisees here warn him to be silent, but evidently to preserve his own life as well as their lives, and to not call down the wrath of Rome on them. Point being there are always some who would have silence for self-preservation, even among those who love God.

I have something which may sound hard to hear, but please hear me out with this. I suggest that the Pharisees are pretty good stand in for us. I say this because the modern United States is a whole lot closer to Rome than it is to the scrappy occupied Hebrews. Every president we've ever had is Christian, and even today many lawmakers are actively trying to get their own interpretation of Christianity enacted into law. Saying you're a Christian in this environment makes you part of the status quo. The Pharisees were part of the status quo of their day, too. But they knew that if the faith they all claimed was being interpreted in a different way from that status quo, it would put them at great risk, not just with their faith community, but with those in political office with power that they did not want to see exercised.

This kind of peace is a peace of preferring silence to consequences.

A silence that would rather have safety than the wrong kind of notice, where they would rather have what they themselves believe kept private, for fear that by speaking they will be lumped in to a category where they will be judged, or that will have consequences for them. You remember that the Romans kept the peace, the Pax Romana, a peace being kept under constant threat and stifling of any dissent. That is oppression. I fear that some calling for unity in our own time do so understanding that it can only come from stifling dissent rather than engaging with it.

The disciples were making so much noise that even their friends in positions of authority wanted things kept quiet. They feared reprisal. When we look at this in our own day and age, I wonder what is it that people are afraid of? Are they afraid of us? This was a giant procession, with shouts of Hosanna! right in the middle of the street. I do not suggest we should be loud just for the sake of being loud, that is obnoxious, no one likes that, and it can undercut what we are trying to say to people. *I am not saying that we should be obnoxious.* If we are doing things that upset the status quo, there will be consequences.

But if no one hears our hosannas, or sees our public witness, or develops a new understanding of what it means to proclaim Christ based on our evangelism and public profession of faith, then I'm not sure I see the point. Even in our nation that loudly proclaims it's Christianity, doing so could mean consequences that you could view as retaliation, while to others, that message could be desperately needed liberation.

This is a challenging message, and so I close with this challenging Franciscan Blessing:

May God bless us with discomfort — discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts. May God bless us with anger — anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace. May God bless us with tears — tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy. And may God bless us with foolishness — enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done.

May it be so. Amen.