

If I Were You

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 21:1-11

Delivered on April 5, 2020

If I were you, here's what I would do. I wouldn't do that if I were you. If I were you, If I were you. There is a power in that phrase "If I Were You". There is a power in the phrase "If I Were You" and maybe that's because if someone is willing to put themselves in our shoes and see the world from our point of view, then while we don't have to do what they say, it seems that we have to stop what we're doing and take them seriously, listen to what they say. The phrase "If I Were You" does not command us. It does not say to us do this or else, do this or I'm going to get even with you. Do this or I'm going to punish you. But it says to us it is in our own self-interest to do this or to do that. And in being about our own self-interest, think about how much more the phrase "If I Were You" says than simply "This is What I Would Do" or "Here's What I Would Do". What you would do might matter to me if I think you're a lot like me, but the less I think you're like me, the less important it is to me what you would do. So let's say you go to the movies with a friend and let's say you're standing in line with a friend at the concession stand. You say to your friend, I wouldn't spend six bucks on a box of popcorn. But that may not mean anything to your friend. You and your friend may have different taste in junk food. And maybe your friend has a lot more disposable income than you. So six bucks doesn't mean to him what it means to you.

Today is Palm Sunday, and as we hear the story of Jesus entering the gates of Jerusalem, entering the gates as people lined the road waving palm branches in the air and shouting Hosanna, with exuberant cheering for this triumphant king, we might imagine ourselves as one of the people in the crowd on that day. After all, what good preaching is supposed to do is to

make you see yourself as one of the characters in the stories of the gospels. Good preaching is supposed to make you able to imagine yourself as the prodigal son, or as the Virgin Mary, or today as a face in the crowd cheering Jesus as he rides into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey as you wave a palm branch in the air in this sea of green. But the problem with the story of Palm Sunday is that the story does not end on Palm Sunday. For you see if you have never been to church, then you would not know this, but if you have gone to church long enough, you know that everyone who does a good job of telling the story of Palm Sunday will tell you what? Well, they will tell you that the same people who were cheering Jesus on Palm Sunday, just five days later were demanding his death. Those who shouted Hosanna on Sunday, shouted Crucify Him on Friday. And you may listen to this story year after year and say If I were one of them, I wouldn't do that. If I were one of you way back then, I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't turn on him in just five days. If I were one of you, I would have followed Jesus all the way to the cross. When others denied him, betrayed him, abandoned him, turned on him, I would remain his loyal follower to the end. So you who shouted hosanna on Sunday and crucify him on Friday, how could you? How could you do such a thing? I wouldn't have done that if I were you.

Well, if you are making such if I were you statements this morning, I want to start by telling you I don't think that's all bad. I think it is natural to recoil in horror at the way the people in the crowds shouting Hosanna on this day turned out to be so fickle. If you thought such people were wonderful, if you said Good for them for turning on Jesus then I think you would be a pretty frightening person. But at the same time, isn't it easy to say I wouldn't be one of them? Isn't it easy to say if I were you, I wouldn't have done that?

You know, I think it is interesting that when we read the gospels, we read all kinds of things about Jesus, and we even read about details that are so specific that sometimes when you're reading the bible you might wonder why in the world the author thought to include these details. In John's gospel, when you have the story of the woman caught in adultery it mentions that Jesus kept bending down and writing with his finger on the ground. Why do we have this detail? I don't know, but we do. Also in John's gospel when the risen Christ appeared to the disciples on the beach grilling fish and bread, we read that the disciples caught 153 fish. Why this detail, why is the exact number included? Well, again I don't know. But amid all these details you know what we lack. There is not one word in any of the gospels about what Jesus looked like, how tall was he, what was his body mass, hair color, hair line, hair texture, or jaw line were like. What was the shape of his nose, how far apart were his eyes we get none of that. And it's not as if people didn't write about such things in those days. Plato tells us what Socrates looked like for instance and we know that Socrates wasn't pretty. But I think we don't get these details about Jesus because that would make it too easy to forget that Jesus is all of us. And that's not to say that Jesus wasn't a real person, that he wasn't a Jewish male living in first century Palestine. Of course he was. But when God saw him on the cross taking on the sins of the world, he was on the cross for all of us, for every last one of us.

And so when we say to ourselves I wouldn't have done that if I were you, let us ask ourselves how we are treating others who as far as God is concerned have the same face that Jesus had. If we say I wouldn't have cried crucify him then let us ask ourselves how we are treating the most vulnerable members of our society, the poor, the homeless, victims of sex

trafficking as Stephanie talked about moments ago, people who are subject to cruel acts of prejudice and bigotry. If we say we wouldn't have cried crucify him then let us ask ourselves how we're spending this time of pandemic. Are we only lamenting all the inconveniences we have to suffer, or are we spending time thinking about the people who have so many more reasons to lament than many of us do, who have so many more reason to be anxious than many of us have. Healthcare workers on the front lines of this war with coronavirus, older people in nursing homes who have lost all human contact with their loved ones, people who are immunocompromised for whom infection with this virus could be deadly. Are we praying for these people, are we calling them up, are we sending them cards with words of encouragement. If we say we would not have cried crucify him, what are we doing for them? And finally, If we say we would not have cried crucify him, then when it comes to our faith let us ask ourselves are we only interested in knowing how much more we can love God and how many bible verses we can learn and how often we can get to church, whether it's physical church or virtual church, or are also interested in knowing how much more we can love our neighbor, and do good for our neighbor whether our neighbor is the person next door to us or someone living half way around the world. If we say we would not have cried Crucify Him, then what are we doing for all of these people who are the only Christ we will ever see at least in this life, who have the only face of Christ we will ever know, at least in this life.

Whenever Holy Week comes around, I'm starting to find myself reading this passage every year. And I find myself reading this every year not because I enjoy repeating myself, but because no matter how hard I try, I can't find a way to say things better than this. This comes

from the late great Shirley Guthrie in his book Christian Doctrine. You have heard it before and you will probably hear it again:

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Yes, we were there.

We were there with Judas who sold out, probably because Jesus refused to serve Judas' military and political goals for his nation. If it comes to a choice between the justice of the kingdom of God for all people and the self-interest of our own people, it is clear which we must choose.

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Yes, we were there.

We were there with the disciples who deserted him and fled when they discovered loyalty to him meant being rejected by both the political and religious authorities, thrown in jail and perhaps killed. Why be a Christian if it does not pay off? Who wants to follow a loser—especially one who gets into trouble with the authorities?

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Yes, we were there.

We were there with the pious leaders of the religious establishment who were out to get him because he did not act as they thought one sent from God ought to act. He criticized good law-abiding people and made friends with guilty sinful people. He thought human beings were more important than moral rules and conventions. Who can tolerate such a threat to the moral and religious foundations of our society?

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Yes, we were there.

We were there with Peter when he denied him. When it is safe and words are cheap, we too confess, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” But when we are among outsiders, we too are afraid to be different. It is better to be silent and if necessary deny him,

than to get in trouble by having convictions and attitudes that only make people mad and turn against you.

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Yes, we were there.

We were there with Pilate when he made the decision to let the mob have Jesus, although he knew the defendant was innocent. It is better to sacrifice Jesus than to go against the will of the majority of the people. What can you do when the choice is between justice that threatens and injustice that preserves your own comfort, power and wealth?

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Yes, we were there.

We were there with the soldiers who played games while he died. While many of us enjoy all the pleasures of American affluence, within a few blocks of where we live (not to mention across the world) children go to bed hungry at night, “strangers” are excluded not only from the benefits of our civil society but also from our churches, sick people are untended, lonely elderly people are forgotten or ignored, prisoners sit alone in darkness. According to Jesus himself, when they suffer he suffers too. What we do or leave undone with them, we do or leave undone with him. We were there.

As we now walk through the gates of Jerusalem and enter the most important week of our Christian faith, who will we choose to be this week? Don’t just say I wouldn’t have done that if I were you. Search the depths of your soul to know who you really are, and if it isn’t someone you care to look at, then change for the sake of the one who died for you this week. Change who you are for the sake of the one who gave it all for you this week. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

