

## ***Give Us Barabbas!***

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Columbus, OH  
April 13, 2025  
Passion/Palm Sunday

**Ancient Witnesses:** 1 Corinthians 4:9-13, John 18:37-40

Jesus was a loser.

By all typical standards, he hung out with losers. His was a Kingdom of Nuisances and Nobodies, a phrase coined by biblical scholar, John Dominic Crossan. He identified with losers. His life ended ignominiously, and he died alone, utterly alone; the admiring crowds were gone. And yet, we can't help but project our images of prestige and success upon him.

How ironic whenever there are the huge mega churches, impressive stadium style auditoriums. The Christian church, in general, seems to be shrinking except for these big, entrepreneurial ventures. People are attracted to them. What does this mean? There are probably many reasons why they are popular, but one of them is this: everyone wants to be on a winning team. I don't know about you, but this is true of me, at least part of me, I admit. *We worship winning.*

Furthermore, the main message one hears from these is prosperity—how to be a winner, how to be successful. Now, the prosperity message, the gospel of success, might be an O.K. message, but it's just not Jesus' message. He wouldn't recognize it. Jesus never seemed to take the dominant values of culture at face value but redefined what it meant to be a winner or a success. Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are the successful." Rather he said, "Blessed are the poor." And Crossan wrote that the Greek word used for "poor" meant "a family pushed, by disease or debt, draught or death, off the land and into destitution and begging." (p. 61, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*)

Now, when Jesus entered the gate of Jerusalem, the crowd was shouting "Hosanna," which means "save us!" Save us from the brutality of the Roman empire! Save us from the tyranny of Caesar! Meanwhile, we hear that Pilate is entering the city through a different gate because Passover is a time when the Jewish people remember their liberation from an earlier time, and rebellion is in the air. And Pilate was there as a show of force and to keep this powder keg from exploding.

So every year at this time it hits me in the face: Jesus' so-called triumphal entry and the crowd's misunderstanding. In most churches, they play Palm Sunday straight. They give the kids palm branches and sing about Jesus, the mighty king. Jesus would never claim to be a king or an autocrat. But we miss the irony, the joke. The first crowd missed it, too. They wanted to be winners, associated with greatness. So, here's the thing: They were an occupied country... had hopes for independence and liberation... dreamed of the reign of David, dreamed of greatness in Jerusalem, the "city of David," with the prophets foretelling of another Liberator, another David. They expected a military leader with chariots, soldiers, a display of power. They had their "Make Israel Great Again" hats on.

And then Jesus gets a donkey! This is like street theater, a pastiche, dripping with irony that was lost on the crowd. When he did not turn out to be powerful there was disappointment. The cheers turned to jeers. So this was the *anti-triumphal entrance*! It was a critique of the way of the empire, the military might and the violence. He also challenged the religion that yoked itself with that power of the empire. Earlier, as Jesus was looking down over Jerusalem, he wept because he realized they were choosing the path not of peace and justice, but of violence and power.

Instead of a religion that was in league with wealth and power, Jesus proposed something radically different. But the crowd didn't get it.

Today, we read part of the story when Jesus was brought before Pilate. And Pilate says to the crowd, "It's customary for me to release to you one prisoner during your Passover observance. Shall I release Jesus?" And they said, "No! Give us Barabbas!" Now, this always used to puzzle me. How could they do this? Well, Barabbas was one of the leaders of the rebellion. He was a violent insurrectionist. And the people were rejecting the way of Jesus, the way of empathy, inclusion and mercy. They wanted Barabbas' way, which was to be in power by any means necessary. It was the path of coercion, destroying enemies, of winning at all costs. On this path nothing else matters—truth doesn't matter, character doesn't matter, fairness and equality don't matter. It doesn't matter how dishonest or ruthless we are. Only winning matters.

And so when I hear that 85% of evangelical Christians voted for Trump, I hear the echo of these words, "Give us Barabbas!" How dare that bishop call for mercy! How dare there be policies for a modicum of diversity, equity and inclusion! How dare you even mention empathy—don't you know it's weak and inefficient? How dare you limit the power of our leader! How dare you hold him accountable or not pledge to him your loyalty!

It seems to me that humanity always has to choose between these two competing ways, the path of power and the path of love, the path of Barabbas and the path of Jesus. And there is an "inherent unmarketability" to Jesus' message, writes Richard Rohr:

#### *Inherent Unmarketability*

*How do you make attractive that which is not?  
How do you sell emptiness, vulnerability, and nonsuccess?  
How do you talk descent when everything is about ascent?  
How can you possibly market letting-go in a capitalist culture?  
How do you present Jesus to a Promethean mind?  
How do you talk about dying to a church trying to appear perfect?  
This is not going to work (admitting this might be my first step).  
(from *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*, by Richard Rohr)*

The way is not by success, but our failures; not by strength, but our weaknesses; not by ability, but our woundedness. As Augustine said, "In my deepest wound I see your glory and it dazzles me." Our wound is the way through, I regret to inform you!

Once Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire (cir 313), and the clergy and nobility banded together to protect the top, it became all about *ascent*, not *descent*. And that suits the ego just fine; it much prefers winning to losing. Even today the church is more impressed with numerical growth than spiritual depth, with quantity more than quality. How can one preach the path of descent to a church intent on ascending? (This, by the way, is what Paul was doing in today's reading.)

Jesus' teachings call us to win by losing. We are raised up by descending. The cross teaches us to win by losing. But the ego doesn't like that. The ego wants to win by winning!

Through the years, as a son, a friend and a pastor, I have been privileged to accompany several people in the process of dying. And when I think about a good death, I don't mean one that is pain free. Rather, the person has come to a kind of *radical acceptance*, makes peace with life and befriends death, ready for its arrival. Standing at the brink of Mystery, of the Abyss, everything falls away—the past and the future. There is a *total relinquishment*.

Anthropologist Angeles Arrien called this process the Gold Gate:

*It is the gate of surrender, faith, and acceptance, where **we learn to release and detach** before beginning something new or progressing forward... **We accept our losses, the roads unexplored, the people we miss and the dreams unfulfilled; we begin to make peace with all that is in and around us. We reject nothing and cling to nothing.***

I've found that accompanying someone to this place is holy ground. It is at the Gold Gate, says Arrien, "where we *awaken to the deepest core of who we are*, and we are asked to let go and trust." The ego—the false self—dissipates. And the True self—a new awareness—emerges.

The Gold Gate, she says, is "to make peace with your life, to be without hope or fear, to let go without regret, to know that you have fully lived." True spirituality is about this radical letting go; *it's about dying before you die*, it's about losing in order to win. And in Jesus, we see the template, the pattern to spiritual awakening. We see that there is *no resurrection without death!*

Many Christians move from the majesty of Palm Sunday to the glory of Easter—from high point to high point. And we miss the low point; we miss the *necessary descent*. (This is why I prefer to call today Passion Sunday.)

*This is the necessary pattern!*

"Spiritually speaking," writes Richard Rohr,

*you will be led to the edge of your own private resources. At that point, you will stumble over a necessary "stumbling stone." **You must "lose" at something...** This is the only way that Life/Fate/God/Grace/Mystery can get you to change, let go of your egocentric preoccupations, and go on the further and larger journey. **We must stumble and fall, I am sorry to say.***

As Joseph Campbell, that great scholar of myth, put it, “where you stumble, there lies your treasure.” Only the dark night of the soul can prepare us to truly see. This is a necessary pattern.

Now let’s face it, sharing this message is a really bad business model! Perhaps that’s why you don’t hear about it in many churches today. Look, there’s no way to sugarcoat this. Until we are led to the limits of our present game plan, and find it to be insufficient, we will not search out or find spiritual consciousness. Until your own resources *utterly fail you*, you will not seek and draw upon a Larger Source. We don’t come to God by doing it right. (winning) We come to God by doing it wrong. (failing)

As Karl Jung put it, that “where you stumble and fall, there you find pure gold.” And Julian of Norwich: “Only in the falling apart of your own foundation can you experience God as your total and real foundation.”

It is said that when people came to Jung with good news, he’d say, “Oh no. If we stick together we can get through this.” And when they came with bad news, “Let’s get some champagne! Let’s celebrate! Maybe a breakthrough is going to happen.”

Friends, maybe a breakthrough is going to happen for us in our path of descent. And as we stumble and fall, may we be ready to find that pure gold.