

Feasts are Dangerous

A Sermon Expositing Matthew 21:1-11

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Feasts are dangerous places to go. People gather closely together; they take drink and eat food that has been passed, touched, breathed upon by others; they share space and air, one taking in the breath just exhaled by another. It is far safer to stay away from feasts than it is to attend them.

Suzanne Collins didn't make feasts dangerous, but she recognized how they can be. She wrote the dystopian series, *The Hunger Games*, in which -for those who are unfamiliar- she imagines a world held together by a barbaric annual tradition that pits 2 young *tributes* from each of 12 districts against each other in a protracted battle to the death that only one of the 24 can possibly survive. These so called "Hunger Games" are hosted and enforced by the capital in memory of an unsuccessful uprising of the districts and they serve as a reminder of the power the capital has over the districts. The tributes are incentivized to fight by the promise of reward and prestige to the district who sends the winner and the enrichment of the tribute themselves. You can see how the propaganda works – the capital creates conditions of dire need among the districts and offers a carrot of reward for the winners of the Hunger Games causing those who might otherwise be better off together to fight and kill one another.

That appalling, larger social reality is mirrored within the games themselves. Occasionally the tributes, those sent into a vast arena to fight to the death, will enact the strategy of simply hiding out and trying to survive by avoiding confrontation. The capital grows bored with the lack of combat, so the hosts of the games create a dangerous situation. They host a feast. At some central location within the arena they put things that each of the tributes need to survive: medicine to treat wounds, armor, weapons, and almost always food. They place in abundance that which is scarce elsewhere in one place as a way of drawing the tributes together in hope that in their being drawn out of hiding and in their gathering together their vulnerabilities will be exposed, their defensiveness will rise and turn into offensiveness and that violence and death will ensue. Collins calls these baited gatherings she writes of – *feasts*. But don't blame her for seeing the danger in feasts, she's only written about what she sees in society. People living in scarcity becoming willing to destroy one another for just a morsel of abundance isn't the stuff of fiction, it's the stuff of our world and has been for a very long time.

Another writer, several of them actually, wrote of the danger of feasts well before Collins did. The one we've read this morning has been given by tradition the name, Matthew. It would be easy in the fanfare presented by his gospel to miss the danger, but it is there and it is not subtle. Yes, Jesus is welcomed to Jerusalem, the center of religious, social, and political life for Israel, with a king's greeting, but the story of Palm Sunday, as we call it, began quietly many pages before. Even as far back as his birth we see Jesus's parents sneaking away to protect him from Herod who is murderously wedded to his power and threatened by the arrival of one called the Son of God. Herod's death ended one particular threat, but required the division of his kingdom into three pieces ruled by two of his sons and a Roman governor baring the tension between Israel and Rome which set the fragile political foundation of Jesus's day in place. On every page of Matthew's gospel Jesus manages not to take sides by calling out *both* of the powers that be. The traditions of the elders are

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

legalistic and lacking compassion he teaches. He has to clarify while he's preaching that he didn't come to nullify the law and prophets, but to fulfill them – a misconception brought about by suspicion of radical teacher. He supported the rendering of tax to the Romans upsetting many Israelites, but said to render to God what is God's implying that Rome and her Emperor were not agents of God. To say that Jesus ruffled feathers would be to put it mildly, in his popularity he became more than a nuisance, he became a threat – a threat to the two powers that converged in one place, the holy city, Jerusalem where a Roman citadel sat next door to the Temple, where power sat next to tradition.

This was the site of gathering for the feast of Passover, the feast Jesus was coming to celebrate. You see, I told you – feasts are dangerous, especially for those who are working to break down the narrative of scarcity that will pit people against one another in service to tradition, in service to the powerful. Jesus would have been well advised not to go to Passover, to stay clear of Jerusalem altogether, but he didn't.

You can't say he didn't know. Of the three times he predicted his own death two of them named Jerusalem as the place where it would happen and named the powerful within Jerusalem as its perpetrators. Yes, Jesus was greeted with symbols of royalty and loud hosannas, but even that supported the notion that he was a threat to those in power. By the time he arrived the city was in "turmoil" as the NRSV translates it. The root of that word is where we get our English "seismic". The city quaked with excitement and celebration and danger. Feasts are dangerous, but Jesus went anyway.

Jesus saw something that nobody else saw. He saw the narrative of scarcity used by those in power to stay in power was a lie. He saw that it is possible for feasts to have enough for everyone, but he also saw that the only way to proclaim abundance loud enough for all to hear was to give everything and have the world see that everything was still his. In order to show that giving up power does not render one powerless he would have to ride right into the face of danger. In order to show that sharing food does not make one hungry he would have to break bread with the one who would betray him. In order to show that woundedness is not weakness he would allow his own body to be broken. He came riding on a donkey Matthew tells us quoting Zecharia who takes pain to juxtapose the humble donkey against the war horse of Jerusalem. Feasts are dangerous, Jesus knows that, he goes anyway, and he leaves his defenses aside, because he knows that though they are dangerous an abundant feast is also the only place we find life.

It is a feast day for us too and there is a danger in our being together. We have acknowledged that it is not merely our own safety at stake, but that of the most vulnerable if we gather in these days and so we live into paradox today. For the benefit of the most vulnerable we do not gather, at least not physically. But let us not be convinced that our feast today is safe. The kind of togetherness we've chosen to practice today can seem safe in the confines of our own homes, sheltered away from others, but caution. Take note that as we are all sheltered away we have greater control over the kind of encounters we have of others than we typically might. We can log on to a Zoom meeting and log back off or mute the person talking if we're not comfortable. We can fine tune our social media pages to see only what verifies our biases. We can close out the uncomfortable and let in only what meets with our delight with greater effectiveness than when we're "out there." Friends, that is a grave danger indeed, that we could make of this moment what we want rather than what we need.

Indeed, the feast we are gathered for today is dangerous precisely because it doesn't happen in the safety of our homes, not really. The food and drink we will take together in a moment is a proclamation. When we come to the table and take what is given freely we are saying that we will rely upon its abundance in these days and in the days yet to come. We will soon be making decisions again about where we go and who we interact with and what parts of their lives we allow to have an effect on our own. The feast we carry with us out into the world will soon be crowded and noisy and full of people clambering to get what is theirs and to keep it. Scarcely anyone will believe in abundance, not in the midst of what is sure to be a recovering economy. People will be afraid of one another and afraid of what is happening in the world and afraid of what isn't happening in the world. We will need those who will come to the table as witnesses of abundance, but they will have to come unguarded, ready and willing to sacrifice. The feast we carry out into the world will not be safe to attend, but attending is the only way we will find life. I'll see you there.

Amen.