

When It All Begins to Boil Over
Lent 2015: I'm Not Okay
Sermon on Matthew 21:1-17 (3/28 & 3/29/15)
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["I'm Not Okay" chalkboard pic.]

Most of us have likely heard the phrase "a watched pot never boils." And, if we've ever done any stovetop cooking, we've experienced the *reality* of the phrase "a watched pot never boils."

You know how it goes: you just want your water or your soup or your *whatever* to boil so you can get on with the rest of the meal prep...but the bubbles don't seem to start rising to the top. No matter how long you stand there watching the pot. *Life* can feel like this sometimes, too, can it not?

Like you're waiting and waiting for the *thing* to happen – the right job to come along...the right romantic partner to show up...the right opportunity in school...the right friends...you name it – you wait, and you wait, but it doesn't come. The proverbial bubbles seem to stay down at the bottom of the pot *or* they never appear at all. You watch and you wait, watch and wait, and...nothing.

Then, there are other times in life when you can tell everything is about to boil over and you wish you could stop it...but you know you just can't.

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I'm not much of a cook, but I know there are some tricks out there for helping with the stovetop boil-over: I've added a little bit of salt or oil to water when I'm boiling it for noodles, hoping it won't spill out once it boils...a McCabe member shared on my Facebook page that her grandma's trick was to throw butter in the pot...and I'm sure some of you have your own tricks.

But what about when things are about to boil over in our *lives*? What works then? In seminary, we pastors who've gone to school in the last 20 years were taught to be a "non-anxious presence" – to do what we can to bring a calming sense to any situation we're in, rather than adding fuel to the fire.

I think this is generally a good practice no matter who you are, what your occupation or life setting happens to be. Adding fuel to any emotional fire rarely helps a touchy circumstance – in fact, it often makes things worse...and then it's hard to fix what happens as a result. We say things we don't really mean. We do things we regret.

So, anyway...we pastors are often taught and encouraged to be a "non-anxious presence," especially in heated situations. Interestingly enough, however, this is not a lesson taken directly from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ – at least not from *today's* story in Matthew 21.

Yes, there were times in the Gospels when Jesus calmly conversed with folks, and times when he took control of a tense situation with a simple, quiet statement. Today's story is *not* one of those times, however. Jesus is anything but calm, anything but simple and quiet in today's story. Because today's story is when, for Jesus, it all begins to boil over...

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Jesus had been teaching, healing and had cultivated quite a following: his 12 closest disciples, of course, but also a merry band of other associates, as well as the curious crowds who seemed to show up wherever he went.

Like other Jewish teachers, or rabbis, Jesus taught Jewish law...but he taught it in a way that lightened it a bit – he taught it in a way that extended some mercy, that encouraged a focus on the “spirit” of the law, rather than the “letter” of it.

As far as Jesus was concerned, *people* were his top priority: if the law was used to hurt people, or gave them too heavy a burden to carry, with rules that didn't make sense, or if people seemed to worship the law over God Almighty, he challenged it. People were attracted to his style of teaching, so Jesus' following grew stronger, day by day. And the religious leaders noticed...but not always in a good way.

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Now, when we read the Gospels, it's easy to throw the Jewish religious leaders under the bus. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and “teachers of the law,” often seem like the villains of Jesus' story – and some of them are. But we have to understand the Jewish religious leaders were in a tough spot with the Roman authorities.

See, in the time surrounding Jesus' life, the land we call Israel was part of the Roman Empire. Though the Israelites were able to live in relative freedom, they *were* under the occupation of the Roman government and military.

If any individual or group started to look like they were inciting a movement against Rome, they ran the risk of making things very dangerous for everyone.

The Jewish religious leaders were in a tough spot because they were caught in the middle between the people and the Roman authorities. In many ways, it was the job of the religious leaders to keep the peace in order to prevent things from getting worse.

And Jesus made some of the religious leaders very nervous. With the healing he did and all of his teaching...with so many people curious about him and dedicated to following him, folks had begun to call him “Messiah” and “Savior.”

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Many Jews believed the Messiah would be a military leader who would, in fact, lead a movement to oust whatever outside empire controlled Israel...

and would then lead the people through a time of peace and prosperity – a time when the land of Israel would be *their* land, once and for all.

The religious leaders were concerned Jesus was this kind of Messiah (or, rather, Messiah-*wannabe*). If he didn't prove himself mighty enough to overthrow Rome, Israelites everywhere could end up dealing with the fallout. And Rome's might was...significant.

So, the religious leaders kept a close eye on Jesus. They even tried to trip him up every once in a while – hoping folks would see he wasn't worth following. But it never worked. Until Passover week 2,000 years ago.

Jews everywhere showed-up in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover – one of their holiest, yearly festivals...the festival that celebrates their freedom from Egypt generations before. The people were looking for freedom from Rome this time around, and they were looking for the One who would usher in that freedom. They were looking to Jesus to be that holy usher...and they were expecting the freedom he would bring to be a certain kind of freedom: the kind of freedom that comes with military might...with violent revolution.

Yet Jesus entered Jerusalem on a humble donkey – a fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture about the Messiah, but also perhaps a dig against Rome's might. There's nothing mighty about a donkey's colt...no grand, white horse armed for battle – that's for sure. Yet Jesus had a following. His “triumphal” entrance made a statement about *true* might...*true* power.

He didn't *need* a battle-ready horse to inspire folks to gather and shout, “Hosanna! God bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” This made the religious leaders nervous. What if the Roman authorities noticed? What then?

And, if the Palm Sunday entrance into the city weren't enough to pique the notice of the religious leaders, Jesus then proceeded to make an angry mess in the Temple.

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Back then, animal sacrifice was a common, encouraged – necessary, even – part of worship. Worship of God was all about the offering you gave. The offering was typically in the form of some sort of animal or grain. You brought your offering to the Temple and one of the Temple priests made the sacrificial offering to God on your behalf.

If you didn't raise animals or grain, you could purchase them in the outer courts of the Temple. So buying and selling at the Temple was common.

But, all too often, poor people and widows were taken advantage of in the midst of the buying and selling...and Gentile money was often used –

which was against Jewish law because of the imagery on their money. Using such money was idolatry – symbolic worship of gods other than God Almighty.

Jesus' outrage that day was over these injustices. That's why he chased out those who were buying and selling...that's why he overturned the tables of the moneychangers. The beautiful house of God had become a place where people were taken advantage of and where God's holiness was made light of. Jesus couldn't stand for it. Not that week, anyway.

Like I said, it was all about to boil over for Jesus. He knew where things were headed that week – and there just wasn't any way to keep the bubbles from exploding to the surface and spilling over.

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At two of our four weekend worship services here at McCabe United Methodist Church, our choir will have presented their annual Palm Sunday cantata. This year's cantata is called “Come, Walk with Me” and it's a musical invitation to walk with Jesus through this holiest of weeks...this week when it all “boils over.”

This week of betrayal. This week of denial. This week of arrest and trial. This week of torture and crucifixion. This week of death and burial. This *holiest* of weeks is also the most horrifying of weeks. It begins with today's shouts of praise – “Hosanna, hosanna! Save us, Son of David!” – and, by Friday, moves to shouts of “Crucify, crucify!”

From Palm Sunday to Good Friday, humanity in all its fickleness and fragility is proudly on display.

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Here at McCabe, today marks the end of our “I'm Not Okay” series. In this series, we've thought about many of the ways in which we humans are fragile and broken...the ways in which we are not “okay.”

We've considered temptation...doubts and questions of faith... physical illness...worry and fear over the future...judgmentalism...loss and grief. Today, we begin the final leg of our Lenten journey. And, during this final leg, all of our human brokenness is exposed.

Yet, while this week does put all of our brokenness on display – while this week reminds us poignantly of all the ways in which we are not okay – this week does not *end* with Good Friday. It doesn't *end* with death and burial.

Because, by this time *next* week, we will be celebrating God's response to human brokenness. By this time next week, we will be giving thanks for the hope of Easter – hope that reminds us how God is working to make everything okay...eventually. Thanks be to God.