

“Another Fine Mess We’ve Gotten Into”

Matthew 22: 34-40

Matthew 24: 1-14

“The Day Has Come:

A traditional rabbinic tale as quoted in *The Healing of America*

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The title of today’s dialogue sermon is taking from one of Laurel and Hardy’s famous skits, “Another fine mess you’ve gotten me into.” In one scene typical of Laurel and Hardy, the two are going at it.

Hardy says to Laurel, “Isn’t this silly?”

“What?”

“Here we are two grown up men acting like a couple of children. Why, we ought to be ashamed of ourselves.”

“Well, you started it.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Well, I didn’t.”

“You said you did.”

“Well, I didn’t...Just shut up and get this mess cleaned up!”

Today’s dialogue sermon is in response to two questions that were posed by the congregation. The first one was this interesting question, “*How do we work our way out of this mess? The mess: political gridlock, pending environmental disaster, pending economic disaster, and vast cultural differences?*” The second question fits well with the first: “*How can individuals contribute to solutions?*”

It is an interesting question, “How do we work our way out of this mess?” I would like to start off by asking you first to reflect on the question, “How do we know when we are in a mess and when we are not?” For instance, most people would agree that the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf is a terrible mess. Why is that a mess? If we all agree that the oil spill is a

terrible tragedy and a great mess, then what would the oceans have to be like in order not to be in a mess.

The same questions could be asked regarding political gridlock. The author of this question is assuming that gridlock is part of the mess we have created. What makes gridlock a mess? And what would our political system look like if it was running perfectly with no messes whatsoever?

Again the same question holds true regarding our current recession. Why do we consider that a mess? What should it look like if all was running smoothly?

Finally, the author of the question states that our vast cultural differences have led to a mess? We can assume that he or she might be pointing to our long history of racism, wars that seem to stem from cultural differences, and struggles over values. Again, what makes this a mess and what would it have to look like to not be a mess?

In the second reading from Matthew Jesus predicts that there will be “wars and rumors of wars” before the final consummation of history is complete. He predicts that “nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom, and that there will be famines and earthquakes” as signs of the coming kingdom. Many scholars believe that these words were written sometime after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. (or A.D.). The birthpangs may refer to the fall of the temple which was the center of Jewish ritual and worship and the destruction of Jerusalem itself. It would be akin to American’s losing the White House and having Washington D.C. annihilated for all practical purposes.

But, I wonder if what Jesus was saying was “I bring in a kingdom of love, of peace, of kindness, and of forgiveness. But, before that day can happen you can count on the fact that the

world as we know it now will have to fall.” Think about it. Jesus promised a new kingdom and a new kind of world. You would think that everyone would rush to find ways to live in a world of peace and kindness. Instead, what happened? They killed him.

Scripture speaks of having to endure a series of birthpangs or labor contractions before God’s kingdom can be realized. Jesus says one kind of world will have to be torn down before a new kind of world can be ushered in its place. In Matthew 24 he says it this way, “You see all these, do you not (referring to the stones of the temple)? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” It is sort of like the old motto pasted up on the gymnasium wall, “No pain, no gain!”

If we want a world without oil spills we have to reorder our priorities. If we want a world where money can’t buy political votes we have to tear one system down and replace it with another. If we want a more stable economy we may have to learn to live within our means like other places in the world. If we want diverse communities that embrace our differences we may have to think of ourselves more like a tossed salad and less like a melting pot.

Of course, this doesn’t address the question of why we have so many messes in the world. But, I do wonder if it gets to the issue of what it takes to solve our problems, address the issues, and clean up the messes. There is a bumper sticker that says, “*Be the change that you want to see in the world.*” From a Christian perspective this is really the answer to the second question that was posted, “How can we contribute to the solutions to our problems?” From a Christian perspective we aren’t responsible for making the world a better place. We are only responsible for making ourselves better people. That is, we need to be the change that we want in the world.

I say this because sometimes we try to solve problems by becoming something we don't want to be. It's like when we tell our children, *"If you hit your little sister I'll knock your block clean off your neck!"* The threat may have the intended effect of stopping the older child from hitting the little sister, but we haven't actually changed the world. All we have done is to reinforce the old world view that "might makes right."

In closing I will refer back to the rabbinic tale I read earlier. The rabbi had asked the class of children how do you know when night is over and the day has come. To which the children replied with common sense answers about being able to see figures in the distance or distinguish a pear tree from an apple tree. The rabbi acknowledged their answers and then gave them a new way to look at it. *"You know the night is over and the day has come when you look into the eyes of any human being, and you see there your brother or your sister; for, if you do not see your brother or your sister, it is still night—the day hasn't come."*

How do we work our way out of this mess? It's when we see that the fishes in the ocean as our friends and God's fellow creatures. It's when both the poor among us and the rich are seen as valued members of our extended family. It's when we can look into the eyes of even the most despised and see someone who shares our human DNA. It's when we become the change we want to see in the world. It's when we start living into the Kingdom of God.

Nike says, "Just do it." God says, "Just be it!"