

Confronting difference in a spirit of peace (John 12:12-16)

Jesus' last week in Jerusalem is full of confrontation.

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A few weeks ago, on a gray, wet Saturday, three strangers knocked on our front door. This is a relatively rare occurrence these days, so I was curious to hear the reason for their visit. They waited patiently while I unburied myself from my laptop and books and wrestled our overgrown puppy away from the door. When I finally stepped outside, my visitors—a middle-aged wife and husband and their stony-faced teenaged daughter—introduced themselves as members of a local Baptist church and said they wanted to talk with me about Jesus.

Did I know about Jesus, they asked? Yes, I replied, we're acquainted. A series of questions followed.

Do you believe, if you die today [God forbid, they said], you would go to heaven?

Do you believe there is anything you can do to lose God's love?

And so on.

Some of their questions were interesting ones, and, in a different setting, with different people—say, in a bar, with friends—I could imagine them prompting lively, wondering, exploring, even challenging conversation. But I sensed my visitors were

looking for particular answers, and that some of my answers would not be the right ones. After answering a few of their questions, I thanked them for stopping by. They immediately got the hint and said goodbye, leaving me with a few pamphlets.

There's not much in our broader culture right now that makes me hopeful about people talking across political and religious differences. Given the way church affiliation maps onto political affiliation in the US, I suspect my Baptist visitors and I would have political as well as theological differences.

But something about our brief encounter made me feel oddly hopeful as I reflected on it afterward. I felt a tenderness and respect for their commitment and their willingness to risk the vulnerability of knocking on strangers' doors to talk about Jesus. I wondered if I missed an opportunity; if, with a little more courage and patience on my part, we could have had a different kind of conversation.

Jesus' last week in Jerusalem is full of confrontation. He enters in a way that is purposefully conspicuous, his homespun parade a kind of counterprogramming to the imperial show of force in Pilate's procession into town. The next day Jesus disrupts the buying and selling and money-changing in the temple, and in the days following, religious leaders come at him repeatedly trying to discredit him and get him into trouble. But all of this confrontation begins with a sign of peace: Jesus rides into town on a borrowed donkey, recalling Zechariah's promise of the humble king, riding not a war horse but a donkey; the king who would "command peace to the nations."

Jesus confronts and disrupts all of the domination systems that harm, corrupt, or diminish the wholeness of God's good creation and all of its people—not just on Palm Sunday but in his whole ministry, with his whole life. Jesus confronts and disrupts—with a sign of peace.

Churches often commemorate or re-enact Jesus' pointed, prophetic parade with our own processions. In this election year, I have been wondering how else we are called to step into the public square with something of Jesus' Palm Sunday spirit. I have been thinking about my Baptist visitors, and how I might have had a different conversation with them—confronting the reality of our differences, not to argue but in a spirit of peace. The narrative of deep divides and polarization and increasing tolerance for political violence in our country makes a lot of us nervous to even talk with neighbors who are not like us. How might we confront and disrupt—with a sign

of peace, in the spirit of peace, with the skills and will for peace—the forces that foment fear and turn us away from our neighbors?

This Palm Sunday I'll still be waving a palm branch and walking the neighborhood with my church, but I hope we will also be wrestling together with these questions and seeking new ways to engage in our community with Jesus' disruptive, life-giving spirit of peace.