

“What have the Romans ever done for us?”
Matthew 25:1-13; Theme Reading from Frederick Buechner

Introduction - What have the Romans ever done for us?

Many of you know that I traveled to London and Rome the first week of this month. What many of you may not know is that a large part of this trip was to do a site visit in Rome, Italy where I will be teaching for 10 weeks this next Spring. The Session on behalf of the congregation has generously granted me a Sabbatical in the Spring, and I will be teaching World Religions and Sociology classes to 25-40 Washington State College students. What a horrible job I have!

“What have the Romans ever done for us” is a scene in the Monty Python movie “The Life of Brian”. One of my all-time favorite movies. If you have not watched Monty Python and particularly this movie, you haven’t lived. Truth be told, my progressive roots as a Christian theologian are largely due to the satirical comedy in this movie. Let’s take a moment to watch the scene play out: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qc7HmhrGTuQ>

The Deadly Sin of Anger

What have the Romans ever done for us was the call for others to join their peasant campaign against the Roman empire. But in reality this anger became incapable (in the movie and in real life just over 2000 years ago) of enacting change because it was so misplaced. How many times have we seen this play out in our recent history?

- Remember Occupy Wall Street in 2009 and the cries of the 99% calling for change? No one could remember what exactly they were rallying against; there were dozens of issues that folk were complaining about.
- Remember the protests that eventually involved the National Guard right here in our city of Portland, just 3 years ago? The violence that ensued was never “intended” they said.
- Remember how you and I have often allowed our anger to consume us and eat at us to the point of losing our own sanity.

As Buechner writes, in these instances we are simply “wolfing down ourselves because we are the skeleton at the feast”. Think about it for a moment. Whatever happened to those social movements or many of our own personal experiences of anger? Oftentimes our anger can be misguided and misinformed and misplaced.

On my recent flight to London and Rome, I became overcome with a bit of anger myself. When I arrived at the airport to check-in for my non-stop flight to London, even though I purchased my ticket 3 months ago, I was told that I had been bumped off of the flight because another airline had canceled their flight and some of the people were now added to the empty seats of my flight. I tried to calmly and plainly tell them: **BUT MY SEAT WAS NOT EMPTY -- I’M IN IT!** In these instances I do not tell people that I am a Pastor! They simply told me that they could place me as standby. Last minute, they were able to find me a seat. All was well, right? Not exactly.

That’s not the worst of it. When I fly to London, wouldn’t you know, my luggage never arrived. Through many irritating phone calls, online message boards, texts, I was told that they had my luggage and it would be sent back to Portland. Nope. It never arrived and now they say

they never found it. Geeesh. Point A. Point B. How can my luggage be lost. Multiple hours of my life were spent on this. My anger became more about their incompetence than my dam luggage! And then after arriving home, I suddenly realized—none of the people I spoke to on the phone or online were responsible for this. My anger had become misplaced. I had let this thing devour me. My attitude toward life had shifted. I needed to let go and gain perspective—to see it as a problem of the privileged.

Matthew 25:1-13—The Parable of the Ten Virgins

Our Gospel lesson today is an extra peculiar story about channeling our anger. Many of us have been hanging around the church for so long that we've heard this story explained as the bridegroom who is actually Jesus and that we, the people of the church, are the bridesmaids or virgins who must keep awake, because we don't know when Christ is coming back. The end is near!!! Doomsday awaits! But, let's get real. The best biblical scholarship that I could find on the subject of this so-called parable, insists that Jesus didn't tell this story. This story does not make any sense when stacked up alongside the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. This story only makes sense when you consider the plight of the anonymous storyteller that we call Matthew. Matthew wrote this story to the people of his community who were angry and longing for someone, anyone to come along and save them from the persecution of the Roman Empire. This story makes sense when you consider the context.

We should all prepare to channel our anger if we are to change the world around us. We should prepare ourselves to see Christ's return over and over in the people around us—to see the faces of Christ in the workers of the airlines and other workplaces who are incredibly stressed these days. I am convinced that Jesus will not lead us to a place called heaven. Instead, following Jesus will take you right smack dab into the messiness of our world, right into the ugliness of all the politics, right into the fears that haunt us, the disasters that threaten us, the anger that seeks to devour us and the needs of all those who cry out for love.

That is where Jesus leads us. It won't always be pretty. It certainly won't be easy. When I look back on my experience in London and Rome, I will always be grateful for the experience of losing my luggage. It allowed me to meet people I wouldn't have for a whole host of reasons, it allowed me to live simply and to be grateful. Where Jesus leads us, it is not always where we would choose to go. But it will certainly awaken us to all that we are created to be and allow us to become our authentic selves.

The Story of Telemachus, the Little Monk from Turkey

Let me share with you a famous story from the historical Roman Coliseum. President Ronald Reagan told the story of "the little monk" at both National Prayer Breakfasts in 1984 and 1985.

The Coliseum was known all over the world as the center and climax of Roman entertainment. The Roman masses had an insatiable appetite for observing bloodshed. Gladiatorial games were held where the winner only won at the expense of the gruesome death of others. But these gladiatorial games were not the worst aspect of the Coliseum, for here, pious Christians were slain by the droves. Wild beasts such as lions, tigers, leopards, and bears were kept in pits till they were crazed with hunger. Then they were released upon Christians—boys and girls, old men and matrons, it mattered not.

One day, however, at the height of the gladiator games, during a celebration of the Roman victory over the Goths about A. D. 370, a lone figure interrupted the games. Without warning, a rough and weather-beaten man jumped over the wall and into the arena. Shouts of excitement over the combat gave way to a profound silence, as all eyes turned from the gladiators to look at the lone figure.

This man had come all the way from modern-day Turkey to Rome. He was a Christian. He had heard about these barbaric entertainments, and, by the grace of God, he intended to stop them. He had shoved his way to the edge of the arena and jumped into the midst where every eye could see him. He immediately went to the middle of the gladiators in combat. Fearlessly, this hero raised his voice. “In the name of Jesus Christ, Stop! Stop! Stop disparaging God’s mercy by shedding innocent blood.”

A shout of defiance met the voice of our hero. Pieces of fruit, stones, daggers, and other missiles were hurled down from the stands. One of the gladiators, expecting the applause of the crowd, stepped forward and rammed his ax into the skull of the man who had dared to interfere. As the hero sank lifeless to the ground, the angry cries of the crowd died away into a profound silence in the arena. The work of this Christian was done. His name was Telemachus. According to John Foxe, in his famous book of martyrs, “From the day Telemachus fell dead in the Coliseum, no other fight of gladiators was ever held there.”

Faith is about Trusting, Loving and Living

For both Telemachus and Jesus, faith is not about believing this thing or that thing. Faith is about trusting, about acting, about living. Faith is putting one foot in front of the other or jumping the wall and trusting that the ground will be there. Faith is about channeling our anger to not be misplaced or misguided but courageous enough to do the right thing. Faith is living, knowing that the darkness awaits us all but trusting that the darkness will not overcome us.

So don’t be consumed by your anger my friends. Channel it so that it does not devour you. Be prepared yes—not for doomsday to happen, not for the bridegroom to return—but for the possibilities to begin. Despite the metaphors that have been handed down to us, Jesus is not the bridegroom and we are not all the virgins—some of which are pure and others tossed aside. In the same way, Jesus is not the shepherd and we are not the sheep. These are metaphors designed to put our fears to rest, to channel our anger and focus on living life with purpose. Today. Not tomorrow. Today.

For this truth, Telemachus was willing to jump over the wall and shed his very life’s blood. He had the boldness to demand that the gladiator games cease (after nearly 1000 years of existence), and by the grace of God, they did. Today, the Coliseum stands in ruins, but also as a symbol of the courage of one small monk from Turkey who channeled his anger and acted courageously.

My luggage is forever lost. My favorite Columbia Sportswear and other items are in British Airways heaven somewhere. I don’t blame any one individual because that would be misguided anger. I don’t choose to never fly with British Airways again and harbor resentment. Believe me, I have thought about it, but what purpose would that serve—I would be the only one who suffered. As Mark Twain has said, “Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured.”

The question, what have the Romans ever done for us is certainly grounded in misguided anger. Perhaps the better questions are, “what have I ever done for the faces of Christ around me—and what have I ever done to right the wrongs I see in the world?”

A-men.