

# The Mistakes that Matter

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**Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 11:1-11**

Last Monday night, a number of folks from Knollwood and the community gathered in our Fellowship Hall to hear a lecture by Bart Erhman.

Bart is a New Testament scholar who teaches at the University of North Carolina. He has a new book out called *The Triumph of Christianity* that explores how a tiny, minority religion swept the world.

But in some ways, the most interesting part of the lecture, at least to me, came in the Q&A afterwards. That's when Bart explained how he went from being an Episcopal choir boy to a fire-breathing fundamentalist teenager to a liberal Episcopalian adult and ended up as a card-carrying agnostic.

A turning point came when Bart was in graduate school at Princeton University . He was exploring a passage in the gospel of Mark where Jesus defends his disciples against the charge they are violating the Sabbath by plucking grain to quell their hunger (Mark 2:23-28). Jesus counters that King David did something very similar by feeding his men on the Sabbath with bread taken from the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest. The problem is, Abiathar was not high priest at the time; Ahimilech was. So Bart wrote a 35-page paper explaining why what

appeared to be a mistake in the gospel of Mark actually was not.

Bart got an “A” on the paper, filled with all sort of esoteric appeals to Greek grammar and syntax. But on the last page, his professor wrote one-line that turned out to be life-transforming. That scribbled note said, “Maybe Mark just made a mistake.”

Anyone who embarks on a serious study of the Bible eventually discovers there are technical mistakes in the Bible, whether that be Mark’s mistaken citation in chapter 2, verse 26, about who was high priest a thousand years before, or a pre-scientific view of the world as a three-tiered cosmos of heaven above, earth below, and the shadowy depths of Sheol below that. Truth be told, any first-grader knows more about the nature of the universe, unfolding in an endless array of stars and galaxies and black holes, than *anybody* in Bible times.

But with the Bible, as in most things, there are mistakes that matter and mistakes that don’t. If for example, you put an extra teaspoon of salt when whipping up your grandmother’s famed chicken soup, that’s probably not a catastrophic mistake. But if you let that simmering pot of stew boil over on the stove because you’re absorbed watching Duke hold off Syracuse in the NCAA tournament, then that’s a much bigger problem.

Similarly, if Mark says Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, while Matthew seems to suggest Jesus rode in while straddling a donkey and her colt (Matthew 21:7) that’s mildly interesting, but not exactly a game-changer. What matters is that all four gospels agree that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey the final week of his life. And that by that action, and the cleansing of the temple that came immediately afterward, Jesus issued a prophetic challenge that cost him his life.

As Mark tells the tale, Jesus’ so-called triumphal entry was carefully staged. It was not a sweet, sentimental religious procession. It was more like a teeming multitude of teenagers taking to the streets yesterday across the country, bearing their signs and raising their shouts, because the world as we know it has to change. Only in a world without social media, Jesus organized his protest the old-fashioned way: by dispatching two disciples to fetch a donkey.

When the two unnamed disciples reach the donkey, prominently placed by the roadside, the disciples give the agreed upon password: "The Lord has need of it." Upon hearing those words, the owners nod knowingly and turn over the reins.

And when the disciples show up with the donkey atop the Mount of Olives, where Jesus is waiting, they create a makeshift saddle with their cloaks. Then Jesus climbs upon the young colt and goads it toward the city of Jerusalem looming down below. The disciples fall in behind, wondering as always, where Jesus is leading them next. And what it will cost him, as well as them.

As Jesus' tiny mount, waddles toward the Jerusalem, his feet almost drag the ground. He is clearly no warrior king, riding gallantly on a stallion or in a state-of-the-art war machine, a chariot. Instead, Jesus comes in unarmed, unabashed love like a bride marching serenely toward the altar. In a kind of street theater, Jesus acts out the ancient prophecy of Israel's end-time king who was to come "humbly and riding on a donkey" . . . "commanding peace to the nations" (Zech. 9:9).

As for the crowd's reaction, the cry of "Hosanna" could be a simple exclamation of joy and praise or a politically charged appeal meaning "Save Now!" Hence, what the crowd's shouts meant is not entirely clear. But this much is certain: trying to turn Jesus into who we want him to be instead of honoring him for who he is, is one of those mistakes that matter.

A friend introduced me to the work of Shelly Rambo who teaches at the Boston School of Theology. Dr. Rambo had her theological world turned upside down by her ministry to vets returning home, maimed by war. For those wounded vets and those who love them, there are no easy answers as to why their lives were changed forever by a land mine while their buddies, two steps removed, escaped unharmed.

In light of such experiences--and the experience of ministering to such wounded warriors, armed with nothing but her tears, Dr. Rambo has little patience with any church that serves up quick and easy answers. Instead, she implores us to spend more time, lingering with Jesus at his cross. And if we dare, to follow him on Dark Saturday as he "descends into hell." Because that's

what it is like to be truly present to another person in the depths of their anguish: it's like descending into hell.

As Dr. Rambo writes, "Being caught with Jesus in that sacred space between Good Friday and Easter . . . doesn't mean you don't have the promise (of resurrection), but the certainty's not there. You can hold on to the promises of God that life will come about, but holding on to the promise is different from a certainty that we know how this is going to end. Because often we don't, especially when we're with people and communities who are in such pain."

Yes, we want Jesus to save us. And we want "saving us" to mean Jesus spares us from hardship and harm. But he enters Jerusalem clear-eyed that the way to whatever victory God has in store for him does not go around suffering but through it. And he bids us follow him, binding up the wounds of those who are hurting and taking up the cross of those who are oppressed.

Another challenge Jesus offers on Palm Sunday is to confront the appeal of violence. To an oppressed people chaffing under Roman rule, the longing for Jesus to destroy their enemies was strong. Instead, in a truth that yet sends a chill down the spine, Jesus invites us to love our enemies. Which has nothing to do with generating warm, fuzzy feelings toward those who despise you, but rather treating them with respect and care, not because of who they are, but because of who you are: one of Jesus' people?

We live in an era when being suspicious and hostile toward those different from ourselves is being raised to an art form. We tear children from their parents at the Mexican border and we call it "national security." Refugees are cast as potential terrorists instead of as desperate people trying to escape terrorism. All this is reminiscent of a corrupt temple system from Jesus' day that divided people into who were in and who were out, according to their religious and ethnic pedigree. It was just such a divide, religiously and politically justified, that sent Jesus storming into the temple, overturning tables and staring down vendors as he cried, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations! But you have made it a den of robbers!" (Mark 11:17).

Making God's house a "house of prayer for all nations" is something Knollwood strives to

do. That's one reason I'm so proud of all the ways our church has become a safe haven for refugees.

Recently, our Church Administrator, Marlin and our Minister of Spiritual Formation, Diane, went to the home of one of the refugee families with whom we' partner. Marlin and Diane were there to pick up food from Aisha who had prepared some wonderful Syrian cuisine for our church's Wednesday night supper.

Upon learning that Diane was near, the children immediately went to their rooms, changed clothes, and came out beaming. They announced they were ready to go to Knollwood.

When Diane patiently explained that they didn't get to go this time, the children were crestfallen. One or two burst into tears before stating emphatically they were going to "*their* church." And so, they did.

Incidentally, today from 3-5 at Knollwood, you can buy crafts and baked goods from the Refugee and Immigrant Society of Entrepreneurs, aptly nicknamed, *RISE*.

"My Father's house shall be a house of prayer for all people," cried Jesus, putting on notice all those who want God's house to be a refuge for their own pride and privilege instead of a staging ground for the coming kingdom of God.

And then, a final challenge on Jesus' Palm Sunday ride into Jerusalem: a challenge to our self-sufficiency and other delusions about ourselves. For Jesus not only challenges violence toward *others*, but violence toward *ourselves*. The kind of violence that quietly takes its toll in those voices, sounding in our heads and hearts: the voices that tell us we're not good enough, that we need to be more and do more to count, that if anyone knew the full truth about us, they'd despise us almost as much as we sometimes despise ourselves.

It is to combat that form of violence, along with every other, that Jesus climbs up on that cross on Friday of Holy Week. Like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, Jesus allows himself to be ridiculed and rejected, shielded only by God's restless, forgiving love. Until in his dying and in his rising, he becomes the world's most profound and enduring assurance that God loves you, right

here, right now, just as you are.

I know a pilgrim in the way of Jesus who, like Bart Erhman, had her life changed by writing a paper for a Bible class in college. She expected the class to be a breeze since she was raised in the church and knew her Bible stories. But it turned out the class was taught by an agnostic who delighted in bringing cocksure Christians like her down to size.

This young woman got an “F” on her final paper, by her own admission a simplistic reflection on the death of Jesus. Her professor scrawled a probing question across the bottom of her essay: “What makes this (death) any different than the parent of a fireman or (soldier who loses a child)? Why is this sacrifice more profound?”

She rewrote the paper and passed the class. But years later, she found herself still hounded by her professor’s question, so in a blog post, she took another stab at an answer: “People give their lives on a daily basis for each other, for strangers even. But God didn’t just sacrifice his life; God sacrificed his deity . . . God sacrificing his son is so much more because he has more to give . . . (God had) further to fall.”

Yes, the power of Jesus’ cross rests in his obedience--as the great hymn in Philippians has it, even unto death, even death on a *cross* (Phil. 2:8). Because the God present in him would stop at nothing, not even *that*, to pour out the suffering, resilient love that was and is the hope of the world.

No, the mistakes that matter are not whether Abiathar or Ahimilech was high priest at such and such a time. Or whether Jesus rode into Jerusalem on one donkey, as Mark has it, or on two, as Matthew seems to suggest.

No, the mistakes that matter are choosing our comfort over Jesus’ challenge, our fears over his welcome, and our smug, self-assurance over his lavish, forgiving love.

As a friend going through a harrowing ordeal texted me this week, “We remain steadfast in our love for each other, in our love for God, and in his love for us.”

“That’s the most important thing of all,” I texted back.

“It’s everything,” he answered.

And he was right.

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*O holy Christ, come at us and after us still, armed with nothing but God’s gracious, forgiving love. Amid our many mistakes that matter little, save us from the one mistake that matters most: failing to recognize and welcome you as our King of kings and Lord of lords. In your name we ask it of the one you called, “Abba,” Amen.*