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Passing Judgment

Luke 19:39

The writer James Baldwin once described what it was like to live in a Swiss village where he was the first black man that many villagers had ever seen. It was a village of about 600 people, mostly Catholic, which had no library, no bank, and no movie house. Baldwin was there through the generosity of a friend whose mother was born in the village. The vacation home of this family was a wonderfully isolated place for a writer to work.

For the people in this village Baldwin was a stranger in the most extreme sense of that word. No one believed he was an American because they already knew that black men came from Africa. As he walked through the streets the children would shout “Neger! Neger!” totally oblivious to how incendiary that epithet would be in America. Baldwin understood that this was not hate speech, but he also recognized that the children and their parents had already passed judgment on him. He was not just a stranger to them. He was also looked upon as inferior.

Baldwin has described one of the ways that this status of inferiority was communicated:

There is a custom in the village—I am told it is repeated in many villages—of “buying” African natives for the purpose of converting them to Christianity. There stands in the church all year round a small box with a slot for money, decorated with a black figurine, and into this box the villagers drop their francs. During the carnival which precedes Lent, two village children have their faces blackened—out of which bloodless darkness their blue eyes shine like ice—and fantastic horsehair wigs are placed on their blond heads; thus disguised, they solicit among the villagers for money for the missionaries in Africa. Between the box in the church and the blackened children, the village “bought” last year six or eight African natives. This was reported to me with pride by the wife of one of the *bistro* owners and I was careful to express astonishment and pleasure at the solicitude shown by the village for the souls of black folks. The *bistro* owner’s wife beamed with a pleasure far more genuine than my own and seemed to feel that I might now breathe more easily concerning the souls of at least six of my kinsmen (*Notes of a Native Son*, page 221).

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem everyone knew he was a stranger. Jerusalem was the cosmopolitan center of that region. Its leading citizens were the elite of Israel. Its religious leaders set the tone for what was acceptable in the surrounding culture. Jesus had no standing with these people. His father was an unimportant man from an unimportant town. Jesus arrived in Jerusalem with a very ordinary name, no money, no education, and no formal credentials. The followers he had attracted also came from the bottom rung of society. There is no question in the minds of the leaders of Jerusalem about how Jesus and those who follow him should be judged. These strangers are inferior human beings.

But Luke’s gospel tells us that Jesus and his disciples have not internalized this judgment. Jesus comes riding into the city on the back of a donkey. In ancient Israel a donkey was considered the royal

animal. King David rode a donkey into the city when he was anointed King. His son Absalom was riding a donkey when he led a rebellion against David. He hoped that the sight of him on the royal animal would rally his troops to acts of bravery. But Absalom should have shown more caution in his royal pretensions because while riding that donkey his head was lodged in a tree and there he died when David's men caught up with him. For someone like Jesus to ride a donkey into the city showed greater audacity than Absalom. By so doing he was claiming the mantle of the messiah. The Romans might not understand the symbolism, but the Jerusalem elite could not miss the significance of what Jesus was doing.

To make matters worse, the route of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was familiar to all devout Jews. It was the journey that was annually taken in the old days by the kings of Israel for the reaffirmation of their kingship. The ceremony was described in Psalm 118. The king would enter the city through the east gate, coming from the Jericho valley where he has undergone an experience of ritual humiliation. He would come into the city riding on the back of a donkey. When he reached the gate of the temple he would ask for admittance. But what he was really asking was for the priests to speak for God in confirming him as the true king of Israel. The priests waited for the king on the stone steps that led into the temple. And they would say "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

The devout Jews of Jesus' day knew the ceremony well even though they had never seen it. Since the days of the exile there had been no authentic kings in Israel and it was understood that this ceremony would not be re-enacted until the messiah came (insight of biblical scholar James Sanders). As Jesus rides into the city on the royal donkey and approaches the temple, the priests are not waiting on the stone steps. It is Jesus' followers who give out with the shout that the priests were supposed to give, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

It is then that the Pharisees step in to put Jesus in his place. They order him to tell his disciples to stop. The elite of Jerusalem have already passed judgment on Jesus and his followers. They are ready to use any form of intimidation that will bring Jesus' activities to an end. They will do whatever is necessary to demonize him in the eyes of the people. The Jerusalem elite do not understand what Jesus has come to Jerusalem to do. The journey to the cross is all about helping us to see one another differently through the lens of God's redeeming love. What Jesus did on the cross opens the door to a world where we no longer pass judgment on one another.

There was once a Rabbi who asked his disciples when one knew that the night had passed and the day had come. After thinking for a while the disciples replied, "Is it when you can spot the difference between a goat and a sheep at a hundred yards?" "No," replied the Rabbi. So the disciples tried again. They asked, "Is it when you can spot the difference between an olive tree and a fig tree at a hundred yards?" "No," replied the Rabbi. "Well then, you tell us Rabbi," they pleaded. The Rabbi said, "One knows that the night has passed and the day has come when one can look into the face of a stranger and see a sister or a brother (Alan Story, *Journal For Preachers*, Lent 2010, page 27)!"

Jesus went to the cross to bring that new day into being.