**Going to the Circus with Jesus**

A sermon for Inauguration Weekend

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You may have missed the news this week, with everything else going on, that the circus is closing. Literally. The Ringling Brothers Circus, the greatest show on earth, announced this week that they are packing it in after 146 years of touring performances. That’s a long time; its roots trace all the way back to PT Barnum himself. So, not a good week for the circus. Unless, I guess, you happen to be an elephant.

I remember going to the Ringling Brothers’ circus as a child out at an arena called the Cow Palace in San Francisco. I have to say, I didn’t quite get it. There was a lot going on: sounds and colors and surprises in every direction. What I remember I basically, an hour and a half of extreme sensory overload, and then, at the end the giant elephants walked in and everybody clapped. It was mesmerizing in a way, and I liked it, I guess, but when it was over, I found myself wondering, what was that, exactly? Was there some kind of story going on that I just was missing? I couldn’t figure out what it meant. Or whether it was *supposed* to mean anything?

The word circus has a far broader meaning that the one given to it by PT Barnum, and it has nothing to do with animal tricks. It derives from an ancient Latin root that simply means a gathering place for people, often circular in shape. They can be permanent places for gathering -- think of Piccadilly Circus in London or the Circus Maximus in Rome – or they can by temporary, moveable feasts, such as the Formula One circus. Circuses are where the people gather.

We had two of them this weekend. One on Friday at noontime in our nation’s Capital. And the other the next day in Washington and, in fact, in cities all around the world. Some of us attended these circuses. I watched them on TV. And while I was similarly mesmerized by the spectacles as I had been at the Cow Palace years ago, this time, I was not at all confused about what these circuses meant.

Both of them were important, valuable moments in our national life. The Friday show was about a peaceful transfer of power. And the Saturday show was about the power of peaceful transformation.

The cast at the Friday show was made up of important people with powerful titles, whose decisions affect the lives of many. The script and the spectacle were carefully choreographed to demonstrate to the world that in our country, the highest civic loyalties of those entrusted with leadership must be to our system of self-government – above policy preferences, political ideologies, and self-interest. This is what sets our nation apart from many others that cannot peacefully transition authority. It is what the founders of our nation believed was God’s destiny for us: a government of laws, not people. And the reason they believed God was involved was because they knew how hard the task of self-government is: for an individual, a community or a nation. They knew how necessary God’s help would be in the work of keeping the needs of the many ahead of the needs of the powerful. This is why we pray at inaugurations, why I pray for our local and national leaders, why The Episcopal Church participates in official inauguration events.

And yet, while people who hold office have ultimate loyalty to the system of peaceful self-government – people of faith have a higher ultimate loyalty. Hence, the need for people of faith to be involved in the Saturday shows, too. It is important not to forget that the cast at the Saturday shows was also made up of important people (people like you and your neighbors) with powerful titles (like child of God) whose decisions affect the lives of many (like our sisters and brothers and all whom our lives touch). That circus had a script, too – not about the peaceful transfer of power, but about the power of peaceful transformation. I know there were many different groups of people at these marches with many different agendas and attitudes. But I was proud to see among them people of faith there, especially from St. Paul’s and our sister churches in our Diocese and here in Bedford, standing as an act of faith in solidarity with women and all people who are feeling vulnerable.

I was proud because, as Christians, our first loyalty is to the love of God. Through the grace of Baptism, we accept God’s love for us in our hearts. We nourish that love so it may make our lives more life giving. We share our belief in God’s love for all people with others. And so, our civic duty as Christians cannot end with the Friday show, with the protection of an imperfect system of government. Our highest civic loyalty must be to continually transform our common life until it reflects the love of God by protecting the most vulnerable, by ensuring respect for the dignity of all people, and by faithfully stewarding the whole of God’s creation. We continue to fall short of God’s dream for us to live together in these ways; so we continue to witness the suffering that this brokenness causes to ourselves and frankly to those more vulnerable than we are; and so we continue to repent, literally to turn around and go in a different way, and to urge the repentance of others, so that we can be transformed into the beloved community that God longs for us to be.

If Jesus’ life and death and rising was about anything, it was about God’s desire for human transformation – both of the individual and of the whole. One of the things I love the most about being a Christian is that we believe our individual human transformations are entirely caught up in our collective human transformation. Put another way, the spiritual growth and evolution of societies is entirely related to the spiritual growth and evolution of individual people. They cannot be separated from each other. That integration was at the core of Jesus’ work in the world, is at the core of God’s work among us here at church and, frankly, is at the core of the Holy Spirit’s life at work in you.

Today we read the story of Jesus calling his first disciples, inviting them on a journey that will be radically life changing for them, and for their community. Who knows why Peter and Andrew and James and his brother felt such an immediate attraction to following Jesus? (I sure didn’t). But it probably had mostly to do with their desire for internal change and growth. For their own curiosity. To improve themselves. This was true for me too, in my early moments of hearing Jesus’ call to me as an adult Christians in my late teens. I thought it would be liberating, life affirming, helpful, and frankly holy, *for me* to go deeper in my internal life with God.

I wonder if Peter and the others realized that their personal spiritual journey with Jesus would ultimately lead them to a loud, mesmerizing, very public circus -- though hardly the greatest show on earth. The Jerusalem circus was a risky place where insecure religious and civic leaders and overly aggressive soldiers used political theatre and threat not to promote God’s love but to maintain control. I wonder if those first disciples realized at the beginning, in that somewhat removed Galilean town, that the invitation to become God’s special friend, would eventually include an invitation to stand up publically for God’s love of all people, even at a time of great consequence and risk. I wonder if I realized that when I was nineteen and choosing to get confirmed as an Episcopalian. Actually, I don’t wonder, I know I didn’t realize that. But it is true, that our invitation to personal friendship with God is inextricably linked to our invitation to stand up for God’s love in how we live together.

On the one hand this is scary, it creates feelings of resistance. But on the other hand it is empowering, and deeply so – because, sooner or later, I’d be at the circus anyway. So would you. There’s actually no escaping it. We are all part of our civic life, to one degree or another, because we are all alive. There is no safe zone, no neutral ground. We are all part of this circus.

And there’s something very special about going to the circus with Jesus, something that is so life giving even when the show is hard to watch.

When you go to the circus with Jesus, he reminds you that the script isn’t finished yet, and you have the power to start writing a much, much better ending.

When you go with Jesus, he reminds you that your commitment to God’s love comes first: before self-interest, before personal preference, before party, and it makes your choices a lot clearer.

Most importantly, when you go with Jesus, you are freed from the trap of feeling like you can do nothing, but that you must do everything -- because the love of God is always here among us, just waiting once again to be made real in the world. Amen.