

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, April 5, 2020
Sixth Sunday of Lent

“Lenten Apologies for Hypocrisy”

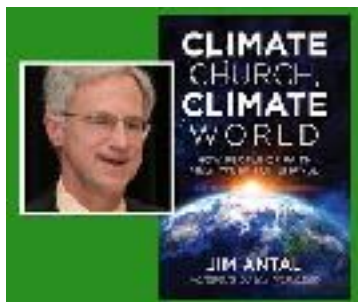
Sixth sermon in our series entitled:
“Lenten Apologies to Galileo Galilei”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Christian Scripture: Matthew 21:1-17



The Reverend Dr. Jim Antal’s lecture at the Guilford Community Church was one of the last public events I attended before the social restrictions caused by COVID-19 took effect.



Though I had previously heard Antal speak at our church about the climate change crisis, I desired to learn more.

During the question and answer session, I publically confessed that I was sitting on the fence about whether to continue as a TD Bank customer. I have been a very happy customer with TD Bank for years.



Yet, I had recently been made aware by a dear friend and member of our church, Daniel Sicken and Bill Pearson, respectively (who have spoken prophetically to us at Centre Church), that TD Bank substantively invests in environmentally and socially damaging fossil fuel projects. I confided that I was not yet persuaded to leave TD Bank. Though it may seem oxymoronic, the faithful who gathered that night in Guilford responded to my confession with ‘polite scorn’. They felt I should not even waiver about leaving TD Bank.¹ In short, I was ‘lovingly tarred and feathered’. The good folk at Guilford hissed with ‘diplomatic condemnation’. Were it not that I was known and loved by my brothers and sisters in Guilford, I thought I might have been graciously ushered out of the church.

¹ Having lived in South Africa, I am acutely aware of the power of sanctions and boycotts against companies that perpetuate injustice. The author and speaker Bill McKibbin also has spoken at Centre Church. He indicated that Chase (JPMorgan) was a prime target for divestment as it concerns environmental advocacy.

In short, I was thankfully and rightfully forced to contemplate that I was a hypocrite for proclaiming my convictions about the environment while as of yet unwilling to reinforce my convictions with action.



I have since transferred my accounts from TD Bank to Brattleboro Savings & Loan and I thank God for the ‘tender rebuke’ I received at Guilford.²

One of the aspects of ministry that I fear the most is being a hypocrite. Jesus saved his harshest rebukes for the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees.



A hypocrite says he or she believes one thing, but does another. And if an authority figure is a hypocrite, then that authority figure leads

² Brattleboro Saving & Loan invests in our local community and is thus far more responsive and attentive to its client’s needs and values.

people astray. Jesus stated that it would better if a millstone is tied around his or her neck and he or she was thrown into the sea (Luke 17:2). If we recommend something, and then *in the same sentence* we state that we are *not* going to do that which we are recommending, then we are hypocrites, and we thus lead people astray.



In our scripture this morning, Jesus entered into the gates of Jerusalem triumphantly. After he entered the city, he healed three blind men. In part because of this and other miracles, Jesus was hailed as a prophet, a king, the Messiah. “Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!” Though humbly on a colt, Jesus entered mounted, as a king would. And the crowd laid palm fronds on the road thus paving the way. Call it an ‘Ancient Near East red carpet’!

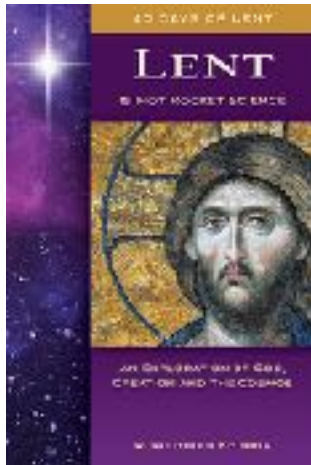


Soon after the people hailed Jesus as ‘the Messiah who comes in the name of the Lord’, he overturned the tables in the temple in a fit of righteous indignation. Jesus was furious that people of faith proclaimed devotion to God while simultaneously turning the house of prayer into a ‘den of thieves’ by unscrupulously making it a marketplace for profit. Many biblical scholars surmise that this violent accusation of hypocrisy against the populous of Jerusalem sealed Jesus’ fate.

As we enter Holy Week, the hypocrisy continues all the way to the cross. Judas, Peter, and Pilot are just three examples of us all.



Today on Palm Sunday, we have these palm fronds. They are beautiful examples of that on which we have focused this Lenten season: the interface of faith and science. The palm frond and the cross (made of wood) are symbols of faith and the products of many processes of science.



Bishop Knisely in his devotional booklet *Lent Is Not Rocket Science* wrote that palm leaves are complicated gatherings of “organic molecules gathered from the soil and the atmosphere, then combined with the rainwater from the sky and the energy form the sunlight and then stored in the cells of its branches. [...] The microbes and cellular creatures of creation labored for years to organize the minerals and chemicals that made up the structure of the palm [leaves]”.³



On Shrove Tuesday next year, we will take these palm fronds and burn them to make the ashes placed on our foreheads the following

³ W. Nicholas Knisely, *Lent Is Not Rocket Science: An Exploration of God, Creation, and the Cosmos* (Cincinnati, OH, Forward Movement, 2015), p. 11.

Wednesday. By burning the palm leaves we will “release the molecules back into the atmosphere so that a new plant can use them again”.⁴



Palm Sunday is about our praise of Jesus Christ and our claim that we follow him as our Lord and Saviour. During Lent, we are to alight our hearts with the fire of the Holy Spirit. This Holy Week, if we are introspective and repentant, if we abandon our hypocrisies, then the fire of the Holy Spirit can enter our hearts and we can release life-giving love to God and others come Easter morning. For we are a resurrection people!



This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.

⁴ W. Nicholas Knisely, *Lent Is Not Rocket Science*, p. 12.