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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
April 17, 2011
Palm Sunday
Matthew 21: 1-11

Hosanna, O God in the highest! How you come to us in ways we never expect. How is a king on a donkey? How can a Savior be hung on a cross? How do we see you when we are only trained to see defeat in these actions? In this week ahead will we see you with us, among us? Will your message come through? Will the palms we wave with joy today be thrown down tomorrow with doubt? May your Spirit guide us through this Holiest of Weeks, beside us, around us, before and behind us, and within us, we pray. Amen.

“Too Much to Bear”

Have I ever told you how much I love parades? I know I've told you how much I love Palm Sunday . . .perhaps my love of parades is one of the reasons I love Palm Sunday so much.

Have you ever noticed how many parades there are in St. Louis? This town really loves parades. Since we live in Kirkwood, the annual Greentree Parade, or as my kids call it, “that parade where they throw candy at you”, always a plus for a child, is a must see. We've even been in that parade! Many years we brave the cold weather to go to the Thanksgiving Parade downtown. It's fun, the bands are good, there are some balloons, and not many people-which is a plus. You don't have to worry about finding a parking space or place to watch it, even if you arrive late-which often happens to us. Some day, I'm going to go to the mother of all parades-the Macy's Day Parade! Some day . . .

This year on a whim the kids and I went to the St. Patrick's Day parade. The weather was beautiful so at the last minute we donned our green and headed downtown. We even brought the dog. That was a bad idea. I had no idea! People bring coolers and pup tents and bar-b-ques! They *have set up shop for the day!* They're also feeling quite Irish! Charlotte went home with a big green glittery shamrock on her cheek that a festive feeling 20 something with a big tumbler in her hand kindly gave her. She was quite happy. It was nothing like the Thanksgiving Day parade. Thousands of people lined the streets that day. And even more hung out on the sidelines, just having a good time. What a party it was!

Now, I don't want to sound blasphemous or anything, but I'm thinking that the Palm Sunday parade some 2000 years ago had a lot in common with the St. Patrick's Day parade, substituting green beer for Passover wine, of course.

There were crowds in the street. Shouts of Hosanna! People threw their cloaks down in front of Jesus, who strode in a donkey. It was an impressive sight, I'm sure.

The city of Jerusalem normally had a population of around 50,000. Depending on which scholar you ask, there were between 200,000 and 2 million people in Jerusalem that week celebrating Passover. Obviously there's a big discrepancy in those numbers, but the point is no matter how you slice it, there were a lot of people. So many people, in fact, that the city was in turmoil. The word Matthew chooses to describe Jerusalem is the root word for seismic. In other words, the ground was shaking beneath the people. Whether it was literally shaking we don't know. But we do know that it was spiritually shaking. For you see, there were people there who had travelled hundreds of miles to see Jesus ride in on that donkey. And there were others who had no idea who he was. "Who is this," they ask of the people who crying "Hosanna", which literally means "save us". *Who is this man you're shouting at to save you, the crowds wonder. Who is this?*

This isn't a question only for Palm Sunday spectators, though. It's a question for anyone who's ever wondered who Jesus is, and why he entered Jerusalem when doing so led straight to the cross and his death. Who is Jesus, and why would he do such a thing?

Trying to uncover the "historical Jesus" is a popular pursuit in recent years. Scholars abound, most notably in the Jesus Seminar, a group that tries to uncover the authenticity of what Jesus said and did. His entry into Jerusalem, as recorded by Matthew and Mark, has received considerable attention, most notably by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, who argue quite convincingly that Jesus' procession was a political statement. It was a statement in opposition to the other procession that would have been taking place that day, the procession with the Roman governor Pontius Pilate on a war horse, who just happened to be in the city at the same time in order to keep peace and maintain order. But when the two processions collide 5 days later, Jesus dies, a victim of the Roman government, but also-because of the resurrection, a symbol that God's justice and power can and will defeat the power of a zealous and despot government.

It's a good theory, and it stacks up well with Mark and Matthew. It gives inspiration to people who are oppressed or who stand against oppression to do so with courage. It's a theory evident in the lives of Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa, or liberation theologians writing in Central and South America. It's a theory that should cause all of us to stop and question injustice and to remember that on this day when we ritualize that Palm Sunday parade, we do so singing "All Glory, Laud and Honor" not "My Country Tis of Thee" or "God Bless America". It's a good reminder that our allegiance is first made to God, and then to country.

But we've been following along in John's Gospel these past few weeks, and John's theory and John's Jesus is a lot different than Matthew and Mark. When we left Jesus last week, he'd just raised his dear friend Lazarus; brought him back to life. That incredible sign caused so much fear among the religious leaders, that they began plotting ways to kill him. There were simply too many people following Jesus after that, so the leaders decided it was best to kill him rather than have an uprising on their hands.

But unlike Matthew and Mark, Jesus doesn't raise Lazarus to bring to light how unjust the leaders are; he raises Lazarus for the simple reason that he loves him. In fact, in John,

Jesus does everything because of love. God is love. And that is new. God has always been described by words like power, majesty, omnipotence and righteousness. But John's unique idea is that God is love. As John's story moves to its conclusion with Jesus washing the disciples' feet, the central point that emerges is that God is love, and that Jesus incarnates this love.

And the cross is the ultimate expression of love; it is where Jesus' love for his disciples and for us will find its fullest and most visible expression. Make no mistake about it, Jesus hangs on a cross because he loves us too much not to. Because when you love someone as much as God loves us, that's just what you do. I've said it before, trying to offer a helpful analogy to something is hard to understand, that I'd throw myself in front of a moving train to save any of my children, not because I want to die, but because I want them to live. I would do that, because I love my children.

I want them to experience what Jesus calls eternal life—a life that has no boundaries—where hope and love are boundless, and where God's compassion knows no end. That is a beautiful life.

I happen to believe that the cross is more than a political symbol of justice trumping injustice, like Matthew and Mark tell it, and more than a symbol of forgiveness—like we see in Luke, but is a symbol of God's love, because without love as our foundation, it's hard to forgive or work for justice. After all, if you don't love someone, do you really care about forgiving them or receiving their forgiveness? Do you really care if they suffer from systemic injustice?

In fact, I would go so far as to say that it's this fierce, profound love on the part of Christ that caused the people to sentence him to death, because that sort of love is scary. A love that says, "I'll put my life on the line for you, I'll die for you, whether you love me or not" is downright . . .outrageous. It's just . . .too much.

It's the reason why, I think, Peter says to Jesus "Lord, you can't possibly wash my feet!" Peter didn't picture a Lord and Savior who would, literally, stoop so low to the ground. Not even slaves washed people's feet. It was degrading for Jesus to get on the floor on all fours and wash the disciples' dirt-encrusted feet.

But that's exactly what he did.

Have any of you ever taken part in a foot washing ceremony? I know some of you have because we did that a couple years ago on Maundy Thursday. I think there was a bit of panic on the look of some people when I announced I was going to wash their feet. And that's OK, because truth be told, I was glad I was the one washing. I'd have the same discomforting reaction Peter did. When I told my Mom I washed people's feet she said, "Oh, Annie, I wouldn't like that." And I know what she means. Maybe you do, too. Feet are stinky. Crooked toes, corns, calluses, discolored toenails. One woman said that if she announced she was going to have a foot washing ceremony, half the people

wouldn't show up and the other half would make sure they got a pedicure. Feet are not our most attractive feature.

But learning to accept just such a gesture of love is central to our faith. If we cannot risk exposing ourselves in such a manner, we may never understand the love of God we see on the cross, a love that we did nothing to deserve or earn. We must remember that Jesus washed everyone's feet that night, even Judas', who he knew didn't love him. It's a hard lesson to swallow, to think that Jesus would love someone like Judas, would stoop so low to wash Judas' feet. Maybe we don't want to believe it, maybe this is why all throughout scripture and history there is a tendency to attach stipulations to God's love; surely one has to do something to receive God's love? But the lesson here, is no, you don't. You don't even need to love God back. That's a hard lesson. Maybe this is why the cross is so hard to comprehend.

Jesus loved the disciples to the end; he stooped to the ground on his last night, and washed their feet, bathing them with his love. With an ordinary towel, which is something we all have in our homes, he loved them to the end. As a little girl I remember my Mom taking a warm, damp towel to my forehead when I was sick to cool my fever. To this day I can remember her doing that because it comforted me so much; it made me feel loved. I imagine that is what God's love is like: a warm towel on our foreheads, cooling our fevers, comforting our souls, making us well, giving us life.

Who is this, the crowds ask?

It is love incarnate.

It is God in the flesh, whose love knows no end.

It is Jesus Christ, whose outstretched arms will greet you at the end of the week, welcoming you into God's embrace. It is the reason why Good Friday is good.

“What is the cross?” Craddock asks. “Can I say it this way? It is to sit for a few minutes in the lap of God,” (Cherry Log Sermons: Why the Cross) who loves you more than anyone else ever could.

Amen.

Sources:

Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, Lent-Eastertide

www.workingpreacher.org

Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John, Frances Taylor Gench

“What the Last I Can Believe and Still Be A Christian”, Martin Thielen

Prayer for Holy Week

Living Christ,

You have brought us again to this holiest of weeks

When you claim us for your own.

Be with us as we walk through it, that we might never again be the same.

You who entered the holy city to speak truth to “the powers that be,”

Teach us not to be intimidated by those mightier than we,

But to speak truth and to confront the things that are not right.

You who came riding humbly on a donkey,

Not to threaten others or to win them over,

But to win them over by your mighty vision,

Teach us the power of a disarmed life and the magnetism of a life well lived.

You who wept for those who did not know the things that make for peace,

Teach us to weep where there is no peace, and tutor us in the ways to build it.

You who were greeted by cheers that before long turned to bloodthirsty cries,

Teach us steadiness of purpose and strength of heart,

Despite shifting winds around us.

You whose anger flared when injustice masqueraded as God’s way,

Teach us the fire of holy indignation, of passionate faith, and rage for injustice.

You who ate at table with those who would fail, betray, deny, and abandon you,

Teach us to love without condition.

You who were mocked, beaten, and judged but still forgave those who abused you,

Teach us how to forgive, how to return blessing, not curse.

You who commended your spirit to God and breathed your last,

Teach us how to let go, how to lean into God with all we are and to trust.

You who died, innocent of all crime, the victim of other’s hatred and fear,

Turn us from all hatred and from the fear that keeps us apart.

Help us to learn from you to love.

Living Christ, as we enter this Holy Week,

Be with us and touch us.

Shape us and ready us for the new life you bring

To us and to your world.

Living Christ, make us yours. AMEN.

