

A Ride of Humility
Mark 11:1-11, 15-19
March 25, 2018 – Palm Sunday

Friends, welcome to Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. If you are like me, you grew up in the church. Holy Week and Easter came every year, such that I don't remember my first Palm Sunday. It's been a part of my life for my entire life. I remember waving the palm branches in my childhood. I remember coloring pictures of Jesus riding the colt. But it wasn't until I took on the serious study of the Bible, when I was in my mid-thirties, that I really understood the significance of Palm Sunday.

First, I note that Palm Sunday is a fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures, for in Zechariah 9:9 we read:

Rejoice greatly; O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

But I believe that Jesus' request and decision to ride into Jerusalem that morning on the back of a donkey is about much more than simply the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. I believe the Palm Sunday event was a direct and intentional display of contrast.

You see, Palm Sunday is the Sunday before the Jewish Passover; and during the week following, literally tens of thousands of Jews would come streaming into Jerusalem from all neighboring countryside to celebrate the Passover at the temple. And historians tell us that, because of these crowds gathering in Jerusalem, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, would have also been coming into the city to personally oversee the Pax Romana, to personally insure that the Peace of Rome was maintained. The governor's full-time residence was in Caesarea by the sea. It's a much nicer place right on the Mediterranean. Winters were milder; and summers were cooler. If you've read the book of Acts, you know that Paul spent two years in arrest and protective custody in Caesarea, because that's where the governor was. But, on this Sunday before the Passover, the Governor would have moved to Jerusalem with his entire entourage – a legion of soldiers, drummers, equipment bearers; and, of course, the governor would have been riding a large white horse with tack appropriate for the occasion. Indeed, the governor would put on quite a parade, a parade that indicated the governor's prestige and power but a parade that also announces to everyone in sight: "Don't mess with Rome!"

But on this Sunday, almost twenty-one hundred years ago, just as Pilate and his "show" was entering Jerusalem from the Northwest, Jesus was mounting a humble colt; and, in total humility, amidst a group of common people, he would ride that colt to the temple – entering from the Southeast. Do you see the contrast?

Do you see the potential conflict? It was only five days later that Jesus would stand before Pilate and say, “My kingship is not of this world.”(John 18:36) Indeed, it was so. Pilate is a study in arrogance. Jesus is a study in humility; and, on this Palm Sunday, I remind each of us again that we are called to follow Jesus, not Pilate.

Over the last five Sunday’s of Lent, I have spoken several times about how we must love ourselves as God loves us. Remember, I have said that Jesus’ second great commandment is actually two commandments: Love your neighbor and love yourself, for Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” But I have also suggested that part of that love is a sense of humility. Don’t compare yourself to others. It is enough to know that God loves you; the risen Christ walks with you and cares for you. You are a child of God. You don’t need the pomp. You don’t need a big parade to feel important. You are important.

But then there’s the neighbor part: “Love your neighbor... as yourself.” And, who is our neighbor? Every other person on this planet, even those who are difficult to love. And this brings me to the second part of our Gospel Lesson for today.

When Jesus arrived at the temple that first Palm Sunday, the scriptures tell us that he went in and looked around, and because it was late, he returned to Bethany – his home base just across the valley. But, if you’ll allow me to read between the lines, I need to assume that Jesus was bothered by what he saw; because, the very next morning he returned to the temple, overturning the tables of the money changers and majorly upsetting the business interests of Jerusalem. What was going on here? What was so upsetting? We know one thing for sure: The collection in the temple, the offering, could only be paid with temple currency; but the common currency of the day was Roman. So there were moneychangers who would exchange Roman currency for temple currency, of course with a tidy profit for themselves. Then there were the people selling doves and other animals for sacrifice in the temple. And, when one entered the temple with their animal, particularly at a busy time of year, there were a lot of animals to be sacrificed. So it’s suspected that one might give the animal to the priest who would offer thanks and a blessing and promise to sacrifice the animal later on the givers behalf. Well... as the patron left, the priest would return the animal to the seller to be sold over again; and, of course, the priest would be given a nice cut for the return of the animal.

It was three weeks ago, that we heard John’s version of the temple cleansing, but I didn’t preach on it, choosing instead to concentrate on the Ten Commandments. But I could not let Lent go by without including Mark’s version of the story. Hear again Jesus’ indictment: “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations?’ but you have made it a den of robbers.” What do I love most about this? Of course, I appreciate the command to keep God’s house a holy place, a special place, set apart from profanity; and I’m not

speaking just about language. I'm speaking about all the raw earthiness of life in contrast with the sacred.

But even more than that, I love that phrase at the end – “My house shall be called a house of prayer *for all nations*.” What’s Jesus saying? This isn’t just a Jerusalem temple, or a Jewish temple, it’s a place of prayer for all people.

The temple building no longer exists. It was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD and has never been rebuilt. Today, there is a Muslim shrine atop the temple mount; and the real estate is technically owned by the country of Jordan, and I’m just fine with that. When I was on the Temple Mount in 2012, we held a Christian Prayer. We had to do so very quietly; because the Muslims in control have a fear of Christians trying to evangelize on the Temple Mount; and sadly, I understand that. But the point is – Jesus was inclusive. On Palm Sunday 2100 years ago, Jesus claimed the temple for all people. God is the God of all people. Jesus suffered death on the cross for all people. Jesus rose on Easter Sunday to a newness of life for all people. Jesus said, “Love your neighbor,” and every other person on this planet is your neighbor.

As I was writing this sermon, I asked myself, “Did Jesus truly love *every* person on the planet?” And then, the Spirit spoke to me. As often happens when I’m writing a sermon, a scripture popped into my head. “Did Jesus truly love all people?” I thought of the crucifixion scene. Roman soldiers had just tied him to a cross and pounded spikes into his hands and feet, and what was his response? “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”(Luke 23:34) Indeed, that is the ultimate expression of eternal love – including love for your torturous murderers.

So it’s Palm Sunday, and as I often preach, even on Palm Sunday there is a call – a call to humility and a call to love for all people. This Palm Sunday will you walk the road with Jesus? This Palm Sunday will you reaffirm your love for all people? This Palm Sunday will you accept the love that Jesus has for you with humility and compassion, with joy, and with peace.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,

Twenty-one hundred years ago, you rode a humble colt into Jerusalem, and there you declared the love of God for all people.

Lead us and guide us, that we may love all our neighbors as we love ourselves every moment of every day of our lives.

This we pray in your holy name.

Amen.

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