

Sermon for April 9, 2017

Palm Sunday

The Courage of Common Folk

Matthew 21:1-11

The Reverend Roger Pancost

The other day I read a news article that reports that the sale of various office supplies sky rocketed over the past few months because people have been making so many signs to carry in political rallies and marches. In January alone, poster board sales were up 33% and foam board sales were up 42% from the same time the year before. Sales also increased for other supplies, like paint, glue and markers.

I wonder if there was a surge in the sale of cloaks the day Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem? According to the story the crowds that welcomed Jesus that day spread their cloaks on the ground like a great carpet. These articles of clothing would not have been in very good condition after being trampled on by a donkey. I can just imagine the local cloak stores cashing in later that day.

With all joking aside, I invite you to join me in reflecting further on that event that took place nearly 2000 years ago. In the weeks leading up to this event Jesus told his disciples a number of times that he was going to Jerusalem where he would be handed over to the religious authorities and be condemned to death. Despite this proclamation of impending doom, the disciples choose to stay with Jesus on this journey. When Jesus and the disciples reach the outskirts of Jerusalem they are joined by countless other people.

Palm Sunday is about Jesus having the courage to enter Jerusalem, but as Professor Veronica Mile points out, it is also a story about a communal experience. She writes,

“The communal emphasis is unmistakable. It reveals the “uncommon courage of common folk who have experienced a presence so powerful, a message so compelling, and a love so complete that they transgress the boundaries of religious and civil acceptability to make the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. Many of them live in villages and towns outside Jerusalem. Others have traveled from as far away

as Jericho, sorely needing the life-sustaining sustenance that Jesus so freely gave. His ministry has captured their imagination and nourished their souls as they have followed him to open-plain revivals, supped at banquets in the fields, experienced his touch, witnessed his miracles, and listened for the gospel that he proclaimed. This moment, however, is different. Jesus' voice gives way to that of community, an unremarkable company of friends and strangers who announce with unambiguous resolve that Jesus is the one for whom they have been waiting."

Dr. Mile goes on to say: "The sense of anticipation and excitement must be palpable as they begin this journey, flanking Jesus on all sides with no discernable concern for the potential danger. Surely they are aware that the religious leaders consider Jesus an antagonist and the chief nemesis of their survival, yet the marchers' testimonial proclamation intensifies as they approach the city gates. Their hosannas echo throughout the mountainous region, for Jesus has become the undeniable expression of God's presence in the world."

(Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, pp 152-156, WJK Press, 2010, Veronica Mile, Professor of Homiletics and Christian Education at Wake Forest University School of Divinity.)

As Dr. Mile points out, the crowd that gathered to welcome Jesus demonstrated great courage. They were willing to risk their own security in order to show their support to the one for whom they have been waiting. The story of Palm Sunday comes to us each year and invites us to join that courageous crowd in walking with Jesus as he proclaims that the Kingdom of God is at hand. To do so involves risk, for the values of God's Kingdom often run counter to the values of the world.

To understand what the values of God's kingdom are all we have to do is look back over the three years leading up to this triumphal entry. In those three years Jesus taught, with his words, and his actions, what the values of God's Kingdom are:

Jesus taught that in order to live in community with others we sometimes have to seek reconciliation. This means asking for forgiveness from those we have hurt, as well as offering forgiveness to those who have caused hurt.

Jesus taught that it isn't enough for us to love our friends and family members; we have to love our enemies. If nothing else, we are to pray for those who persecute us.

Jesus taught that when we donate money to those who are in need, we are to do so in a way that doesn't bring any personal glory. The same is true of prayer and

other forms of religious practice.

Jesus taught that we shouldn't be consumed with acquiring material wealth, but rather we should be consumed with loving and serving God. He also said that we shouldn't allow the worries of the day to keep us from doing such work.

Jesus taught that we should refrain from judging other people. He also said, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law of the prophets."

Jesus taught that greatness does not come from having power over other people, but through serving other people.

Jesus taught that if someone is hungry, give that person something to eat. If someone is thirsty, give that person something to drink. If someone doesn't have clothing, give that person something to wear.

Jesus taught that it is a blessing to be a peacemaker and a blessing to offer mercy to another.

Jesus taught that compassion is more important than following a rigid set of religious laws and that there is no place in God's kingdom for hypocrisy.

Jesus taught that all people are welcome at the table, regardless of gender, social class, illness, disability, or any other division created by humans.

Throughout history countless individuals have joined the Palm Sunday crowd by joining Jesus in proclaiming, and living, these values. These everyday folk have had the courage to stand up to those who were oppressing others; they have fed the hungry and housed the homeless; they have fought for the rights of all people; and they have demonstrated the power of love.

On this Palm Sunday 2017 what risks might we take in order to join Jesus in this procession of "kingdom values"?

Will we bravely take a stand against the injustices in the world?

Will we find additional ways to minister to the needs of other people?

Will we demonstrate the compassionate love of God by reaching out to include all people into community?

We don't know if every individual in the crowd that processed with Jesus

continued to proclaim these values in the years that followed, but we do know that some of them did. Some of these common folk had the courage to continue sharing the message that Jesus shared with them. This message has been passed on from one generation to the next, empowering people like you, and like me, to join the procession today.

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who come in the name of the Lord!”