

“Like Minded”

Matthew 21: 1 – 11

Philippians 2: 5 – 11

Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017

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Oh, how we love parades! How we love welcoming and celebrating our heroes; be they sports teams home with a Championship victory (maybe next year!) or cheering on our favorite political candidates, even celebrities! We stand on the side, waiting to get a glimpse as they pass by, will they look our way? Wave to us? And for just that fleeting few moments we are caught up in their aura of fame!

I have a friend who is an ordained Disciples pastor who, I’m not sure how it started but collects Jesus action figures. Actually, collects probably isn’t the correct term. It’s more like she has been given them as prank gifts over the years, each of her friends trying to outdo the others. Jesus with a body builder’s body and blue eyes, or on clocks, or with a superman’s cape. One has the song “We Need a Hero” that plays if you wind him up.

It’s easy, I think, it’s tempting, to take our fan mania mentality of today and superimpose it on the streets of Jerusalem, to turn the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem as a ticker tape celebration waving to Jesus the action figure, as he pumps his fists and leads the chant ‘We’re number 1!’ So, let’s go back and remind ourselves of what was going on at the time.

Imagine with me for a moment the city of Jerusalem long ago; a city at the time with a population of about fifty thousand people on a normal day. But on this particular day, the city begins to swell as people walk in over dusty roads from all over the countryside for a day of religious festivity; Passover; and the fifty thousand begins to grow to one hundred, then one hundred fifty and maybe even more as family and friends come in to be a part of this Holy day.

Theologians Marcus Borg and Domanic Crossen imagine this day in their writings about the final days of Jesus. They write about the need for some sort of crowd control by the Empire Rome so that the people oppressed would not get out of control. Roman soldiers march in the main gate with their leaders riding in on horseback and in front – leading this parade the Roman governor Pontius Pilate on a magnificent white horse. They are there to keep the peace – Pax Romana, the term coined for the supposed calm there was under Roman occupation; a false calm, created by years of fear and oppression. Crowds lined this main street, many of them cheering on this show of force, others watching in fear.

As this parade came in the main gate, there was another smaller gathering on the other side of town. It was almost the complete opposite/upside down image. People lined the roadway to this side gate. Men, women, children – many of them poor, many from the countryside, but others from the city also joining in, caught up in the jubilation of the crowd!

Crowds gathered on the sides of the road, waiting for a glimpse of this one who they had heard about; was he the one? Blessed is he who comes not in the name of a sports team, not representing a political party, no famous actor here, but blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna, they shout, waving palm branches that they've cut along the way, putting them down on the road, taking off outer garments and placing them on the road too to keep the dust down, a royal welcome and peasants and poor can provide! Hosanna, translated into 'Save us!'" shouts the crowd. Save them from what? Roman occupation and oppression, no doubt. Others have heard of his miracles, in Matthew's gospel he has just recently cured a boy with a demon and gave sight to two men who were blind, so 'hosanna', 'save us!' may have had a certain personal element as well as in save me from my illness or my woes or that which is crushing the life out of me, 'hosanna, save us!'

Who is this Jesus to whom the crowd cries out? And more importantly for us, who is this Jesus to whom we cry out?

Each Palm Sunday we are reminded that this is not the Jesus action figure, riding in on a great white steed of military might; not one who represented the dominant culture but was counter culture, not one of wealth and earthy power but of limited means and Godly power, one who, writes Paul to the Philippians, "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross, the most shameful death of the time."

As we stand on the parade route of this day, we also stand facing the cross, knowing the road ahead for this week, a road that defines this one we call Savior.

Lutheran minister Tim Brown, in an article titled "Pastoring the Purple" writes that "the modern pastoral dictum is true; "When I preach a sermon about Jesus, I garner smiles and nods. When I preach a sermon about what Jesus preached about, I garner emails and anonymous notes of complaint." I think we can extend this to not only what Jesus preached about but how he lived his life; on the margins with people of all shapes and sizes both rich and poor, religious and not, sinners and saints. We love to hear about Jesus, until we hear the part between Palm Sunday and Easter, that part that includes emptying himself, sacrifice, humility and know in our hearts that we are called to walk that same walk. Know in our hearts that somehow our cries of 'Save us', our being saved has something to do with this path of emptying, sacrifice, humility.... that we are called to be like minded, to have the same mind as the mind of Christ, one who walked not in the way of domination, one who did not let the world or culture define how he would live but chose to live by the laws of God – the laws of love.

On this Sunday as we turn our face with Jesus toward the cross, we are reminded that there is no such thing as being a Christian of convenience; that having the same mind of Christ will not guarantee us a pain free life, that doing God's will sometime puts us on a path of going against

the norm; standing up for that which is looked down upon by the powers that be, going out of our way to stand with others that sometimes means sacrifice.

In our culture of individuality, of 'me first' Paul's words of 'emptying oneself' are hard to hear. What does that mean? Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. defined it by using the well known parable of the Good Samaritan. He wrote, "The first question which the priest and Levite asked who quickly passed by the hurt man was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me? But the good Samaritan reversed the question: "If I do not stop by to help this man, what will happen to him?"

Words that I saw on a sign at High on Art and Coffee, our neighborhood coffee shop, the other day spelled this out another way, that 'We are not meant to see through each other, we are meant to see each other through.'

The crowd and we yell out, "Hosanna, save us!", we are given the message of emptying ourselves, of humility, of setting aside ego for the other and well, Jesus, we kind of had something else in mind! But the good news? The good news is what we know deep inside, that in the emptying we do save ourselves, as we lose our lives we find it.' A poet and writer from India put it this way,

"I slept and dreamt that life was joy.  
I awoke and saw that life was service.  
I acted and behold, service was joy."

We know these words to be true personally, we've all been there, those times when in reaching out and helping another we have been lifted from our own spirit of malaise and felt more fully alive. And we remember that the words to the Philippians were actually to a church, a people, not one person named Phillip! And as we hear these words as church, we know them to be true as well, that those times when we have come together as body of Christ in service to others, maybe risking at times to stand for what is right, maybe going out on a limb financially because we felt called to do so, we can look at those times and say, yes, in those moments of emptying ourselves, of focusing on other, we experienced great joy. "Hosanna, save us!" And we know that this way of Jesus can indeed do just that.

As I hear these words from scripture, as I contemplate the identity of this one who emptied himself, humbled himself, I am even more disturbed about the values being flaunted in this country, or, to put it another way, that which makes us great. Billionaire wealth at the expense of health care for the poor does not make one great. Military strikes that show muscle yet closed doors to refugees does not show greatness. In such a time as this, we so desperately need the one who rode humbly into Jerusalem, to follow his example.

In our Lenten devotional, today's reading ends with these words, that Jesus created a humble spectacle, and in so doing provided a bold witness that grabbed the attention of the crowd. And, it continues to communicate all the way to today. Jesus, the humble servant, calls us to join him

in God's empire, in which all have a place to serve and, together, create a world of wholeness, hope, justice, and Shalom.

Hosanna, Jesus, save us.

Amen