

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 9, 2017

Palm Sunday

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 21:1-11

What We Want — What We Get

The longer I'm a Christian, following the holidays and calendar of the church, the more I find Palm Sunday to be a mixed bag kind of Sunday. My memories of it from my childhood and younger days are joy and celebration and waving the palms, almost "Easter like."

I mean, it's sort of like the red carpet moment for Jesus. While he certainly wasn't rich, he was famous. And I imagine that first Palm Sunday with adoring fans crowding the sidelines, cheering and clapping, waving and waiting to see their favorite celebrity go by, hoping for a glance, a smile, or a photo op.

And while Jesus rode into Jerusalem with no fancy clothes, no entourage, and no flashing camera; still, the waiting crowd spread out their clothes and palm branches on the road to greet him. It was a red carpet welcome for their long-awaited messiah and king.

Some greeting him with cheers and "hosannas" were followers, some he had healed, others had heard of him, and some just joined in the crowd. But how it went from there was NOT what they expected. The party didn't last too long I don't think.

In this sketch by Otto Dix (German printmaker, 1891-1969), we see Jesus entering Jerusalem, which captures well this mixed bag of a more grown up faith.

In the background, you can see the cheering crowd. The faces look excited, cheering, with palm branches waving and the energy of anticipation. Jesus has come – the great prophet, who heals, does wonders, and is whispered to be the promised Messiah – the one to come and restore the fortunes of Zion and put the world to rights! The Prophet is in Jerusalem!

But Jesus' face looks different. His eyes are down with his head turned away from the cheering throng. He wears a sense of sadness as he rides the colt passed the excited crowd. And I see in his face the expression of a sober resolution.

In the picture he carries nothing with him. And yet, he seems to be carrying everything. The weight of the world resting on his shoulders, as he carries with him God's love for the world, and the hope for all humanity. Hope for all and each one of us. Hope for those you don't like and those who don't like you. He carries with him the gravity of grace. And **this** hope is what the world truly needs.

You see, Jesus enters Jerusalem not to satisfy the expectations of our wants and desires, but rather to do the work on the cross that will give us what we **most need**. And that need (whether we know it or not!) is to have a life with God again through the total forgiveness of our sins!

I think Otto Dix, in this sketch, captures this conflict between what the crowd **wants** and what they **need**. And, we too are in this crowd, wanting Jesus to be who we want him to be: a folk hero, or a political prophet, or a sage who gives answers to our problems, or the revolutionary who will seize power and overturn the government.

But Jesus' face tells us a different story. His expression suggests an alternative path to glory, which is the narrow path to the cross, where self-sacrifice becomes the means of cosmic salvation.

Jesus knows that what the crowd needs from him is not just a prophet, or a politico, but a priest. They need, we need, a Jesus who can mediate between God and humanity once and for all. We need proof that God can act in the world - for good.

The crowd **wants** Jesus to be the lion of heaven, but what the crowd gets - and **needs** - is for Jesus to become the lamb of God.

And as we, centuries later, continue to follow him, to be his body in the world, to year-after-year read and reread, consider and reconsider what all this is for, we come to the day — today — when we turn toward the cross (as Jesus did) and journey with Jesus into his death.

Because, you see, the death of Jesus leads us into the death of our sin. (What on earth does that mean? The death of our sin when Jesus dies?) Think of it like this:

When we are honest with ourselves, acknowledging our shortcomings, our near-misses — well, I'll speak for myself...when I think of mistakes I've made which have hurt other people, sometimes I can't imagine that they could forgive me — and living with that is a huge weight. But when I remember that, even if that person doesn't or can't forgive me, GOD CAN, and that lightens my load and puts me in a better place.

And we can know God receives and forgives our sin because of Jesus' death and resurrection. When Jesus is raised, we discover that God can overcome ANYTHING!!! But I'm getting ahead of the story — that's next Sunday...and we're not there yet.

First we need to go through the sad days...with Jesus...

That is what Holy Week is all about. (Here's where I encourage you to commit to go to one more service before Easter Sunday! Maundy Thursday here or Good Friday with me at St. Andrews in Ayer at noon or at Shepherd of the Valley in Groton at 7:30.)

We need to be reminded that Jesus' journey to the cross is not therapeutic or feel good; rather it is evangelical — meaning it is good-news — for all people, at all times, and in all places — including you.

It can be a helpful exercise to consider the difference between our needs and our wants. And to be clear — making the distinction between wants and needs is not to say that wants are BAD, and that we shouldn't WANT anything — or even get what we want.

But it can grow our faith and move us toward spiritual maturity to step out of the crowd and consider Jesus' journey and our journey as we follow him.

We may discover that rather than wanting God to “make it all okay,” that we really **need** God to pull us through.

Because what Jesus wants for us... is for us to need Him. And then what if **all** we need is Jesus — to make him the center and Lord of our lives?

And what if the Jesus we need is not the sweet European Jesus who never existed anyway, but the in-your-face Jesus who kept saying things that ticked off anyone in authority or of significant means.

When we meet Jesus — the real Jesus — the resurrected Jesus who is the only Jesus — we will get what we need, not what we want. And while we know what we WANT, Jesus knows what we need — and first off, it's HIM.

Because, when he is the center and the Lord of our life, everything gets rejiggered and we have what we need:

- Strength for the day's endeavors
- Patience for the day's frustrations
- Glimmers of light breaking in to the dark times
- Wisdom and insight at just the right time

Calm on the rough days
Courage in the face of the insurmountable
Clarity amid the confusion
A sense of purpose which is found in serving others
Hope when all that's left is despair.

Today is the "calm before the storm." Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, greeted with glorious fanfare. For this short time, at least, it seems that all is well. But in the span of one short week, we will go from "hosanna!" to "crucify!"

It's a tension we can't ignore. But it is a road we can endure. So as we leave here and head through the sad days, notice with me, off there in the distance...
There's a light at the end of the tunnel!

Amen