

Palm Sunday Ironies

Palm Sunday might be my favorite Sunday of the church year. It's Springtime! The crocuses and daffodils are blooming. The robins are singing. Church attendance is good. The mood is upbeat. Palm branches are waving, Hosannahs are ringing, and it's less exhausting than Easter.

But Palm Sunday is also complicated. For, while there are shouts of celebration on the street, there are murmurs of conspiracy in the back alleys. Jesus is popular among the people but the Jewish Pharisees, Chief Priests, and Scribes loathe Him and are looking for ways to discredit and to destroy Him.

Jesus knew exactly what was going on and what was coming. No doubt He had in mind the words of Psalm 31:13, where the Psalmist says, *"For I hear many whispering, 'Terror on every side!' They conspire against me and plot to take my life."*

Jesus also knew that His supporters, though many, were unreliable. He knew that even among His inner circle of disciples there was a traitor and several cowards. Only the boy John and the women would have the courage to show their faces in public when Jesus hung upon the cross.

I saw a movie clip on television one day last week that parallels Jesus' relationship with His Palm Sunday supporters. The movie clip featured a crowd's response to their hometown baseball team. As long as their team was doing well the crowd was into the game, cheering like mad and praising their players; but, when their team made a few mistakes and began to fall behind on the scoreboard, the crowd began to boo. And by the end of that lost game, the crowd's mood had turned surly and even dangerous. The home team players needed to be physically protected from their disappointed fans.

One of the chief ironies of Palm Sunday is that many who cheered for Jesus the loudest during His triumphal entry into Jerusalem were the same people who yelled the loudest for His blood when Pilate asked, *"What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?"* *"Crucify Him!"* was their response. Like baseball fans who turn against their home team when the home team fails to live up to their expectations, many of the original followers of Jesus were only fair weather fans. They

2

abandoned Him, turned against Him, when the going got tough.

A second irony of Palm Sunday is that Jesus was coming into Jerusalem in the wake of His greatest and most impressive miracle. Jesus came into Jerusalem while the news of Him raising Lazarus from the dead was still fresh in many people's minds. John 12:17-18 tell us: *"Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him."*

One might think that this demonstration of power would serve to insulate Jesus from harm. One might think that anyone in their right mind would be afraid to lay a hand on Jesus. It stands to reason that anyone who could raise a man from the dead after that man had been in the grave for four days, could easily put someone in the grave who had the gall to oppose Him.

But guess what? It had the opposite effect, didn't it? John 12:19 says, *"So the Pharisees said to one another, 'See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!'"* Matthew 21:15 says, *"But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, 'Hosanna to the Son of David, they were indignant."* Jesus' success only served to galvanize the resistance against Him. It made the Jewish leaders all the more determined to take Him down.

A third Palm Sunday irony, is that the Jewish nation was waiting and many were praying for their long promised Messiah to come, and here He was staring them in the face. They should have recognized Him, for He fulfilled one Scripture after another.

According to Matthew 11:3-6, John the Baptist once asked, *"Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?"* Jesus answered and said to them, *"Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. 'And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.'"*

Jesus' actions spoke louder than His words, and His words were flawless. But His Messiahship was opposed from two different

3

directions. Those who had power, and didn't want to lose it, opposed Jesus' Messiahship. And, those who had no power and wanted it for their own ends also rejected Him as their Messiah.

On the one hand, the Pharisees, Chief Priests, and Scribes, had power. Even though the Roman Empire was ultimately in charge, the Romans found it convenient to govern with the assistance of local rulers. As long as the Pharisees, Chief Priests, and Scribes helped keep the people under control, Rome would allow them to keep their influence and collect their share of the taxes. The Jewish leaders had come to embrace the status quo. They were content for things to stay as they were. The only kind of Messiah they were interested in was one who would give them more of what they already had.

But Jesus was a destabilizing influence. Jesus threatened the status quo. He called out the Jewish leaders for their hypocrisy. He accused them of injustice, of fleecing the flock they were supposed to be defending. He called them *"blind guides," "hypocrites," "white-washed sepulchers—white and beautiful on the outside but on the inside full of dead men's bones."* The Jewish leaders feared Jesus' influence, envied His popularity with the people, and saw Him as a threat to their livelihoods.

The Jewish leaders also feared that the preaching of Jesus would lead the people to a popular revolt against Rome which would bring the military might of Rome crashing down upon everyone. The High Priest Caiaphas eventually said it out loud: John 11:50 says, *"You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."* **Ironically**, he was right.

On the other hand, the people who had no power were looking for a Messiah who would put food on their tables, money in their pockets, and return their nation to its former independence and status in the world. For them the problem with Jesus was that although He obviously had power, He refused to use that power to fulfill their personal and political goals.

Although the people loved the fact that Jesus could stand up to the Pharisees, Chief Priests, and Scribes, and take them down a notch, they were disappointed with Him when He would not use His power against Rome. He advocated a non-violent response to Rome that

included such things as we find in Luke 6:28-30: He said: *“Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.”* In Matthew 5:41 Jesus said, *“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.”*

Thus, Jesus threatened the power of the powerful and frustrated the ambitions of the powerless. His mission was not to tear down some people in order to build others up. His mission was to bring God’s love and peace to all. His mission was to break down the walls that separated one group of people from another and to bring all people together in love. His plan was not to alter the balance of power between men but to bring all into submission to the power of God.

A fourth irony of Palm Sunday is that almost everyone missed what was being offered them in Jesus Christ. Their savior and their rightful king came to them, made Himself available to them, humble and riding on a donkey, and at the end of the day they rejected Him. And, before the week was over, they crucified Him: Bloody irony, dripping from the cross.

Of course, it’s one thing for us to sit back and analyze all of this Palm Sunday intrigue from a safe distance; it’s quite another thing to see ourselves in the picture. Which side of the fence would we have been on had we been alive in Jerusalem when Jesus came riding in? Which side of the fence are we on now?

In the Sunday School lesson that we have been using in our Sunday School Class, the teacher on our DVD keeps saying of what is presented from the Bible: “This is your story; this is my story.” The young pastor who spoke at the Lenten Luncheon down at Wehwood this past week, told us that the Bible is our book and that we are charged to find ourselves within it’s pages.

Two questions help us to put ourselves within the Palm Sunday picture. The first question is this: What do we have that we will deny Jesus in order to keep it? And what do we want that will cause us to reject Jesus if He won’t give it? It’s easy to pass judgment on the Jewish leaders for protecting their turf. It’s easy to pass judgment on

the crowd for pursuing their own ambitions. But, the truth of the matter is that we are there too. On the one hand, we want to preserve our bank accounts, keep all our possessions and maintain our security. We want to preserve our freedom to do what we want, to keep our favorite pastimes, and to maintain our opinions about everything. We like the status quo.

On the other hand, we want more stylish clothes, a bigger house, a newer car, and a greener lawn. Or, as the old cowboy shared his wish list: “it’s faster horses, younger women, older whiskey, and more money!” We want recognition for our work, admiration from our friends, obedience from our children and praise from our parents.

In other words, we don’t want change if it’s going to cost us anything and we do want change if it’s going to benefit us. We have little tolerance for Jesus when He comes to make us more willing to give and even sacrifice for the sake of His kingdom. We have little tolerance for Jesus when He asks us to curb our appetites for the tickles and the trinkets of this world. Yet, isn’t it true that each time we choose our own way over His way, we add to His sufferings on the cross. We help crucify Him again and again. Yes, **ironically**, Palm Sunday is our story as well as theirs.

But here’s the hope at the end of this journey: Paul puts it this way in Romans 5:8, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” and in Romans 5:20, “Where sin did abound, grace did abound more.” We can’t take pride in that we aren’t like the Pharisees, Chief Priests and Scribes; because, sometimes we are. We can’t be proud that we aren’t like the fickle Palm Sunday crowd; because sometimes we are.

Here’s the greatest irony of them all: Even after the Jewish leaders conspired to kill Jesus and even after the crowds’ loud “Hosannas” turned to shouts of “Crucify him!” Jesus went ahead and gave His life a sacrifice for them all and for us as well. “Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound,” Or, as I heard it put recently: “Grace so abundant that it drips from the ceiling above our heads and oozes up from the floor beneath our feet!” We turn our eyes upon Jesus and ask for His forgiveness and if we believe in Him, He gives it just like that! **The irony of Palm Sunday** is that it ends with Good News after all!

The Fourth Street Church of God

4thstcog.com

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110

Sermon for April 9, 2017

Palm Sunday Ironies

Psalm 31:9-16; Matthew 21:1-11, 14-16;
Romans 5:6-9, 20--21

Jon R. Neely, Pastor
neelyjon@gmail.com