

Seeing Beyond the Parade
Mark 11:1-11
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
March 28, 2021
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When I was a child I went each summer to stay for a week with my grandparents who lived in Waterloo. It became common that I went during My Waterloo Days. One of the highlights of the week was the parade, especially - as you might imagine - chasing candy as it was thrown from the floats.

Today is Palm Sunday. It is the “parade day” of the church. And in my childhood I probably pictured it much more like the parades I knew. But this parade isn’t about candy and marching bands. It isn’t filled with local fair queens or Shriners in little cars.

This day contains so much more. And if we reduce it to the experience of a modern holiday or festival parade, we will miss a lot.

On what we have come to know as “Palm Sunday” Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. As we talked about last week, his act of raising Lazarus from the dead set the course for Jesus’ own crucifixion. From Lazarus’ life came Jesus’ death, not because they couldn’t exist together, but because the powers that be couldn’t stand to allow it.

And arriving in Jerusalem was not accidental. After all this city was the seat of power - both religious and political. Not only does Jesus’ arrival here mean that he is physically closer to the powers that be - the very people who want him to disappear - but he places himself here because so much of what he is about is a critique of these very systems.

And we often forget this. Or maybe our own systems of power have chosen not to teach it. Or maybe because of the ways we benefit from those systems, we have chosen to ignore it.

Instead, we remember Palm Sunday as a parade day. We enter it with hope as people gather to welcome Jesus. We hear this story each year and some part of us holds on to the possibility that maybe things will end differently. We celebrate that people are recognizing who Jesus is and wanting to be part of his movement.

And yet sources tell us that waving branches and shouting blessings wasn’t unique to this day (James D. Ernest, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, pg. 157). In fact, not only were the Jewish people living with a Messianic expectation, but this kind of welcome was part of the festival atmosphere. Yes, there were differences this day that scholars will point out, but we cannot assume that everyone there shouting and waving clearly knew who Jesus was. And, as illustrated in events later in the week, we cannot assume that as they discovered more about him, they would continue to follow.

In fact, even we who claim to be his followers, who wear the name “Christian” because we choose to be part of the movement of those who follow him...often we don’t see clearly who he was. And sometimes when we do, we turn the other way.

Yes, we shout “Hosanna” right alongside the Biblical crowd, a word that comes from a Hebrew word meaning, “to save” or “save us.” But, do we really want to be saved? Do we even know what we are asking to be saved from?

Because, again, remember Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem...the offenses that he had committed that got leaders riled up...these were about challenging the systems that were in place and challenging the powers that be.

Jesus came to save people from systems where the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

Jesus came to save people from religious leaders who put rules in place to keep the masses in their place.

Jesus came to save people from religious beliefs that separated them from God rather than inviting them into relationship with God as treasured children.

Jesus came to save people from leaders who sacrificed others in order to keep their power.

Jesus came to save people from systems that assumed that one group of people was normative and therefore pushed others aside or silenced their voices.

The reality is that both religious and political structures can have a life giving role in our existence, but too often fail to do so. And that was the reality against which Jesus was pushing back.

We pray - and we prayed it today as we sang The Lord’s Prayer - that God’s reign will come on earth as in heaven. But the reality is that across time and space it rarely seems that human beings want to do the work or live in the ways that help make this a reality.

In a world where young black men fear they won’t walk away from a routine traffic stop alive...in a world where Asian-Americans can be shot at work in Atlanta, where shoppers don’t make it home from a routine trip to the grocery store in Boulder with lawmakers offer “thoughts and prayers” all the while loosening gun regulations...in a world where powerful men can commit sexual abuse and their victims are blamed...in a world where families have to make choices between putting food on the table or paying their rent...in a world where a same gendered couple in a committed relationship doesn’t necessarily have access to the same rights as a couple of opposite genders...in a world where we forget that people who are not like us are still people and still beloved

children of God...in a world where all of this is going on, we see the reality of how broken systems remain and how power can become poisonous.

Friends, it is fun to sing big tunes and wave palm branches, but that isn't what this day is about. This day is about Jesus claiming that the world as he knew it and the world as we know it is not the best of what God intends for this world. This day is about our choosing whether we will stand at the entrance to the city and shout "Hosannas" only then to turn back to our comfortable lives and pretend we never met Jesus...or...if we will follow him even when the way leads to the cross. This day is about remembering what Archbishop Desmond Tutu said and what Jesus modeled, that, "All of our humanity is dependent upon recognizing the humanity in others."

Palm Sunday - it isn't just a parade day. It is a day that invites us to see beyond the parade and to choose whether we will truly follow Jesus.

Amen.