

PALMS OF PEACE
Post Presbyterian Church
March 16, 2008
Luke 19:29-42

It is an ancient tradition of the church that the palms which are given to church goers on Palm Sunday are saved for most of a year. I grew up going to the Episcopal Church with one of my dear grandmothers. I remember receiving palms at her church and bringing them to her home and putting them behind a picture of her church in the living room where they became progressively more yellow and brittle as the year wore on. And then, according to custom, people bring their faded and brittle palms back to the church before Ash Wednesday so the priests can burn the palms and use their ashes to smudge a cross on the forehead of believers on Ash Wednesday. I believe it is a good tradition because we need the reminder – from palms to ashes to the cross.

The late William Stringfellow, an attorney who became one of the most articulate theologians of our era, used to worry a lot about Palm Sunday. We come to church on Palm Sunday he used to say, because we love a parade. And we miss the power, the tragedy, and the drama. Stringfellow pointed out that for Jesus it was a day

of serious temptation and difficult decisions. He was tempted when his friends and the crowd started treating him like royalty, waving palm branches, the symbol of Israel's patriotic aspiration, and chanting, 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!' – which was the equivalent of the U.S. Marine Corps band playing "Ruffles and Flourishes," and "Hail to the Chief." When all that started to happen on the outskirts of the capital, Jesus, according to St. Augustine and many others, was authentically tempted to go for it, to claim the ancient throne of David, to rally the Zealots, put the hated Romans to the sword, and declare independence, reestablish the old monarchy. And would we have blamed him if he had chosen the easier way?

John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian, Chicago says, there is nothing in the script that says that Jesus had to come to Jerusalem for Passover. Those who knew him best and loved him most didn't want him to go, advised him not to go, tried to talk him out of going. And when, despite their pleading, he decided finally that this was the year for him to go and turned his attention to the capital city, his best friends in the world followed reluctantly, with mounting trepidation and fear. You can almost hear them: "You don't have to do this, Jesus. We could go next year. Why, Jesus, this impatience? Why this year? Why now?"

Buchanan says that for Jesus, going to Jerusalem was in some way, a saying 'yes' to his own life, an affirmation of what he had come to believe was his purpose, the meaning and significance of his life. It was for him an act of love: love for his people, his nation, love for his own life and love for God. I believe his decision to come to Jerusalem was his final testament, the actual living out of an idea he had increasingly thought about, discussed and taught, namely that somehow his life was a reflection, an instrument of the love that God was, and that to give life in love is to realize the highest, holiest purpose of life. To give life away is to be alive. To lose life in love is to gain life.

And so when the city comes into view for the first time on the road down from the Mount of Olives, and Jesus stops the procession, looks at the city, its wall and rooftops reflecting the morning sun, what he doesn't say is stunning.

He weeps. This is not, eyes moistening slightly. This is real weeping. This is a lament which biblical scholar Fred Craddock defines as "a voice of love and profound caring, a vision of what could have been and of grief over its loss of personal responsibility and frustration, of sorrow and anger mixed."

So in this moment, it is Jesus powerfully expressing love and hope and grief and letting go of perhaps his greatest temptation, to take control and lead the nation – the city. It is Jesus, choosing love and service and sacrifice over power and control and authority.”

In the book, **Thank God It's Friday**, the Methodist minister, William Willimon eloquently talks about how God chose service and sacrifice over power and control when God became one with us. A paraphrased version of what Willimon has to say is this, “Since we have never been able to climb all the way up to God, the amazing story of divine condescension begins on Christmas when Jesus came to live in our midst and ends on Good Friday when he died on the cross. We humans have always thought that if there is to be business between us and God, we must somehow get up to God. But God knew this was not possible, so God came down to the level of the cross, all the way down to the depths of hell in order to relate to us and with us. And the amazing thing is that God still stoops into you life and mine.” God continues to find ways to be with us in the midst of all that it means to be human.

One of the people who has deepened my understanding of how God continues to choose service and sacrifice over power and control in order to be with us was the Roman Catholic priest Henri

Nouwen. Nouwen was a Dutch Roman Catholic priest, professor at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard, and a teacher and lecturer in demand all over the world. Several years before he died, Nouwen surprised his admirers by resigning from his prestigious academic post at Harvard to join a religious community in Toronto that cared for severely handicapped adults.

In the book, **In the Name of Jesus**, Nouwen had this to say about his vocational move. I moved from Harvard to Daybreak, from the best and the brightest, wanting to rule the world, to men and women who had few or no words and were considered, at best, marginal to the needs of our society.

The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house with mentally handicapped people was that their liking or disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with any of the many useful things I had done until then. Since nobody could read my books, they could not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school, my twenty years at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard did not impress any of them. My considerable ecumenical experience proved even less valuable. When I offered some meat to one of the assistants during dinner, one of the handicapped men said to me, “Don’t give him meat, he doesn’t eat meat, he’s a Presbyterian.

This experience was the most important experience of my new life, because it forced me to rediscover by true identity.

These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can do things, show things, prove things, and build things—and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments. I am telling you all this because I am deeply convinced that Christians are called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self. That is the way Jesus came to reveal God’s love. The great message that we have to carry, is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life.”

Nouwen goes on to say that “laying down your life means making your own faith and doubt, hope and despair, joy and sadness, courage and fear available to others as ways of getting in touch with the Lord of life. We are not the healers, we are not the reconcilers, and we are not the givers of life. We are sinful, broken, and vulnerable people who need as much care as anyone

we care for. The mystery of ministry is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love of God.”

In choosing to go to Jerusalem, Jesus did indeed choose love and service and sacrifice over power, control, and authority. Our scripture for today says that when Jesus drew near and saw the city he wept over it saying, “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!” Do we know the things that make for peace? Do we know where to find the peace we all seek, the light that dispels the darkness from our souls and our worlds, that deep-down sense of at-home-ness with ourselves, our loved ones, our community, and our God?

Drawing on his experiences at Daybreak, Henri Nouwen said that peace is found in weakness. “We will find peace in those places of our heart where we feel most broken, most insecure, most afraid, and most in agony. ‘Why there?’ we ask. Because in weakness our familiar ways of controlling our world and our destinies are stripped away; there we are called to let go of doing much, thinking much, and relying much on our rigid self-sufficiency. Right where we are most weak, the peace which is not of this world is hidden.

In illustrating his insights on peace, Nouwen tells about the care he gave to one mentally retarded man named Adam. “Adam needs many people and nobody can boast about anything. Adam will never be better. Adam has never spoken a word to me. His constant seizures even make it likely that medically things will only get worse. There are no successes to claim, and everyone who works with him only does a little bit. My part in his life is very, very small. Some cook for him, others do his laundry, some give him massages, others play him music, take him for a walk, a swim, or a ride. Some look after his blood pressure and regulate his medicine, others look after his teeth. In spite of all this assistance, Adam does not change and often seems to slip away in a state of total exhaustion. However a community of peace has emerged around him. It is a community that proclaims that God has chosen to descend among us in complete weakness and vulnerability and in order to reveal to us the glory and peace of God.”

A peace that is not of this world. A peace not constructed by tough competition, hard thinking, and individual stardom, but rooted in simply being present to each other. A peace that speaks about the first love of God by which we are all held. It is a peace that keeps calling us to community, to be a group of fellow strugglers who

realize that the peace of God is found in the midst of weakness and is characterized not by the absence of struggle but by the presence of love.

When I gathered with Kyle's family last month in Canadian for his grandmother's funeral, Kyle's uncle, the Rev. Mert Cooper, gave me a copy of the sermon he was going to preach the next day. Mert preaches a few times a month in the Presbyterian churches in the Panhandle and he told a great story of how God continues to descend into our lives with gestures of love and presence that make all the difference on our difficult journey of life and faith.

“A Scottish preacher of another generation, Dr. Alexander McClarren told the story of when he was a young man and had accepted his first job in the city of Glasgow. He still lived with his family and their home was six miles out from the city—six miles which included a deep canyon that was always dark and rumored to be haunted. Some terrible things had happened in that canyon.

On Monday morning when young Alexander McClarren was to begin work, his father walked with him into the city. His father gave Alex some advice concerning his first job and when they reached the place of his work, his father said, “Now, Alex, come

home as fast as you can on Saturday night when you get off your job.” But the boy, remembering the deep, dark canyon answered by saying, “I’ll be tired Saturday night, Dad, I’ll be there the first thing on Sunday morning.” “No, Alex,” said his father, “You’ve never been away from home this long before and this week will seem like a year to me. Come home on Saturday night, Son.” Reluctantly, young Alex agreed.

All week long he worried about that walk home. When Saturday came, Alex was more afraid than ever, but he started home. He walked to the end of the fields and came to the canyon. He tried to whistle to keep up his courage, but when he looked into that awful blackness, I was afraid to go on and I couldn’t hold back the tears. Then he thought he heard footsteps and he started to run...but suddenly the footsteps sounded familiar and Alex stopped. Up out of the darkness, came the head and shoulders of his beloved father, who simply said, “Alex, I wanted to see you so badly that I came to meet you.”

In the retelling of this story, Dr. McClarren said, “I knew my father came for another reason, I knew he came for my sake. We walked shoulder to shoulder down into the darkness and to our home and I was not afraid.”

Palm Sunday reminds us that the ultimate realities in this world are compassion and kindness and love and extending heart and hand to our spouses, children, parents, lovers, friends and colleagues.

As Jesus rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” Jesus answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” As Jesus came near and saw the city of Jerusalem, he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!”

This is the beginning of Holy Week. As we seek to choose love, service and sacrifice over power, control and authority, may we remember that on our journeys to Jerusalem we will suffer and lose many things including life as we now know it at some time.

However, if we are diligent in finding ways to be love and do love, along the way we will find real peace – that deep-down sense of at-homeness and at oneness that can never be taken away from us.

During this week, may we know that the God who dwells deep within our foundations is not as interested in our accomplishments, successes, and achievements as much as he desires us to uncover our vulnerable, hurting, and incomplete selves so that his unlimited and unconditional love may be fully known and fully expressed in us and in our world.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of life and death, pain and promise, we gather together on this Holy day and we pray for a fresh sense of your presence in our midst and a renewed vision of your kingdom in our world. Enable us to live joyfully within the limitations of our humanness and encourage us to keep reaching beyond what is comfortable and secure as we become more faithful and more whole.

Through the constancy of your creation and the stability of faithful friends, we are reminded that your persistent love never gives up on us. Again and again, you seek after us when we sometimes boldly and sometimes forgetfully wander away from the only true source of life and strength. We are sometimes angry when you do not protect us from the bad choices we are so good at making or shield us from the great losses and unexpected tragedies which happen upon us all in the living of this good and difficult life. It would be much easier and more comfortable if you did indeed rescue us in times of trouble or change the circumstances we find ourselves in that cause us so much pain and heartache. And yet if we live long enough and have the courage to hang in there and not let our pain and suffering be the last word, we realize that those difficult situations probably teach us more than we could ever learn elsewhere about love, healing, faith, and wholeness.

As we ponder the power and mystery of the cross of Jesus this week, we are reminded that God is not a wish-fulfilling Santa Claus, skilled magician, or good luck fairy who is able with the tap of a wand to make our life all better. We are thankful that on the cross, God took life and death, success and failure into God's self and then in God's own time, used the bad for good and transformed death into a surprised new life. Help us to more fully face our failures, fears, and losses as Jesus so courageously did so that we might know deep down in our beings that life is truly and always the last word from God.

We ask that you would be with our friends and loved ones who are sick in body, mind or soul. Remind them that their suffering is not in vain and encourage us to reach out to them so that they know they are not alone and so we know we are a needed part of our community and reminded of what is truly important. Humble us and help us as we ponder the cross of Christ again this week. Let us pray together as Jesus has taught us....