

April 7, 2020-For Palm Sunday

Scriptures are clickable links

[Matthew 21](#) and [Philippians 2:5-11](#)

Whenever I read the account of Palm Sunday in Matthew, I have the image of a circus parade. I always looked forward to the “greatest show on earth,” the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. One of the recurring acts was the equestrian. Those acts featured beautiful horses mounted by colorful and sequined riders. Invariably there was one rider who was atop two horses, standing with one foot on the back of each of the horses. I am reminded of this feat because of the peculiar translation of Matthew.

Matthew was writing to the Jews, primarily to convince them that Jesus was their long-awaited messiah. To this end Matthew wanted to demonstrate that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Jewish scripture. Matthew alludes to the prophet Zechariah, who mentions, “Behold, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass.” The prophet was using a poetic device of repetition, emphasizing an idea using two different words. Matthew takes it literally, assuming two animals. And wanting to make sure that Jesus satisfied the prophecy exactly, he has Jesus riding two animals. Unlikely.

Jesus rode into town, and the crowds were adoring. He was greeted with adulation. Their greeting was effusive. He was their champion, their hero. They hailed Jesus with gusto. They were fired up, excited over the arrival of this miracle worker, this deliverer. It was Jerusalem’s equivalent of the Wall Street ticker tape parade. Everyone was pumped up.

And how did Jesus feel in that limelight? What was Jesus’ reaction to this deluge of attention, this shower of affirmation? Can you imagine your own response? Few of us have enjoyed such a welcome. The feeling must be great. There must be a rush, a tingle, a swelling inside. But I fear that there could also be a swelling of the head, a disconnection from reality, a skewed sense of one’s own worth. I would probably be puffed up. It would get to me. Such a celebrity status would probably change most of us.

There are signs that popularity and acclaim can distort our character. We have witnessed weakness in the lives of popular and powerful figures. Power and publicity spawn admirers. But more important, power and popularity affect the person who has the fame. He or she may feel above the law, unbound by normal convention, not accountable to the common standards. They live by a different code, not restricted by ordinary morality. They may feel entitled to privileges. Maybe they feel deserving of their favors. They begin to believe their own press notices. The result can be inebriation, a heady sense of self-importance that gives a delusion of grandeur. Their power and popularity cause them to ignore basic ethics. They feel above it all, too special to be accountable, too high to fall.

Pride. It is the exaltation of self, the egotism that ignores the larger world and the creator of that world. We are hung up on ourselves. But isn’t pride supposed to be a good thing? Don’t all of the

latest books tell us to be proud of who we are? Isn't pride a plus? The dictionary leaves us in a quandary, for there are two contrasting definitions. One says pride is inordinate self-esteem or conceit. The other says that pride is a healthy or reasonable self-respect. We know that Jesus and Paul were opposed to the first, but supporters of the other. How do we discern the distinction? What differentiates the two? Pride is unhealthy if it makes us feel self-sufficient or self-important.

Jesus rode into town with a crowd of fans chanting his name, calling him their messiah. It must have been exhilarating. But it did not go to Jesus' head. He did not become affected. There were no attempts to curry their favor or to bend his mission to fit their desires. He would not pander to them. Jesus kept his perspective, his sense of proportion. And he did that by remembering who he was and what he was. His worth, his value, his identity came from within, from his relationship to God. Others did not define him.

The Philippians passage says it. Jesus did not choose to stay with all of the perks and privileges of divinity. He wasn't too proud, too good to come down and mingle in creation. He wasn't above getting down dirty to the point of being crucified on the cross in an ignoble execution. Jesus, God incarnate, would not remain above it all. The scripture says we should have the same mind, the same humble attitude.

Today is not only Palm Sunday, but also Passion Sunday. It mixes the celebration of the parade and the agony of the cross, the high and low points of Jesus' career are in juxtaposition. The thrill of being hailed by the multitudes is contrasted with the despair of being condemned by the crowds, deserted by the disciples and abandoned by God. It is a full gamut—success to failure, popularity to ignominy, famous to infamous. But Jesus never lost his balance. He was always attuned to God.

Sometimes there is no humility in our demeanor. Our scientific mindset is characteristic of our conceit. Genetic engineering seeks to reorder life. Progress moves beyond the ethical norms to regulate it. We have tampered with creation until there are consequences. We rival God rather than please God. We seek to surpass our humanity rather than benefit it. We meddle with God's creation with no thought of God's sovereignty.

Even our ethics are man-made. We rewrite the word of God to fit our lifestyle. We determine right and wrong without consulting the Lord. We have a misplaced confidence in human systems and solutions. When we forget our dependence, we are insensitive to our common humanity. We forget that we are all in need, in need of each other and God. Our self-sufficient illusions make us numb to the misery of others.

Only an omission of God explains our callousness. When we overreach, when we are self-centered and puffed up, when we forget God, there is fallout. Cooperation becomes competition. Community degenerates into dissension; unity erupts into contention. Self-sufficiency and pride breed complacency. Self-assured, we are content with the status quo. We are stagnant and self-satisfied. Where is the incentive to grow if we are self-congratulatory, if we pronounce ourselves o.k., if we are happy with our hospitality, content with our generosity, satisfied with our mission? Pride.

Jesus would not be content with divinity. As holy week unfolds, there were opportunities for him to extricate himself. Why should he subject himself to ridicule, betrayal, feelings of isolation, frustration, loneliness? Why not avoid torture and suffering? But a God who stayed above the fray would not have been able to identify with our loneliness, our frustrations, our sense of abandonment. We have a God who has experienced all of those feelings, all of the disappointments, all of the victimization. God has been there.

Just as the Palm Sunday procession might have made him forget his humanity, the passion could have made him forget his divinity. Brutalized, he might have lost his sense of worth and dignity. Facing defeat, he might have compromised. Jesus might have shaped his ministry to the expectations of the adoring crowd. He might have adapted his mission to please the admiring audience, to maintain the applause, to avoid judgment and changed course. Yet, he retains his equilibrium because of his relationship to God. He maintained his identity, his perspective, because of God. His sense of identity came from within himself, and it helped him to persevere through episodes that would have shaken us, would have discombobulated us. Jesus was resolute.

We are often tempted to seek the approbation that would lift our spirits. Sometimes we look for outside cues and clues as to who we are. There is our drive to be liked and appreciated. And so we curry favor; we yearn for strokes; we seek affirmation. Are we good? Let someone recognize us. Are we worthy? Let someone acknowledge us. Are we o.k.? Let someone compliment us. We feed on the remarks of others, so much so that their approval is what motivates us. It is their affection that we campaign for. To be liked, we mold our decisions and behavior to their standards. We avoid displeasing and sidestep confrontation. To conform to culture's norms, we attempt to achieve, to accomplish so that we will feel worthwhile. The criteria for our worth comes from outside.

Jesus avoided that trap. He derived his sense of value from God. He was worthy because he was created by God, loved by God. He would not forget the Holy Spirit within, his divinity that authenticated him, that legitimized him. Others could refuse him, refute him, rebuke him; others could deny him or deride him or demean him; some would doubt and others dispute him. But he knew who he was. His identity was etched solidly in the words, "This is my beloved son...."

We are not as secure. We are sad when others don't recognize us. We are put out when others do not appreciate us. If we aren't thanked, we are in a snit. If we are not accepted or agreed with, we are in a tizzy.

My church in Salem had prepared a meal for the town mission. The crew chief was distributing the plates as the diners, the homeless, came to the kitchen window. It was assembly-line buffet, loading each plate with the food before handing it to the shelter residents. It went like clockwork, and the residents were returning for seconds. The bearded gentleman at the window asked for a plate of seconds, having thrown his original plate away. The crew member, preoccupied, handed the resident an empty plate—just the plate, with no food on it. The man was temporarily startled, and the crew member was stunned. Then, with a grin, the man shattered the awkward moment

with an observation: “Ma’am, we’re only drunks, not anorexics.” It was said with good humor and honesty.

Can we be as clear about ourselves? Can we resist the seduction of the crowds who tell us we’re wonderful? Can we ignore the approbation and adulation that tells us we’re better than we are? Can we keep the mind of Christ, who humbled himself? Can we refrain from becoming too big for our britches and maintain a proper perspective on who we are? Just a man, just a woman, just another sinner? Can we resist the temptation to succumb to a need for approval, to seek affirmation from the people around us? Can we stop fishing for acceptance and jockeying for confirmation of our worth? Can we attest to our value without resorting to the symbols society offers—success, achievement, recognition? Can we be secure in our own identity and our own worth?

Jesus faced the adoring masses and the contemptuous crowds, the victory parade and the loser’s crucifixion, with the same sense of self-worth. The important words of affirmation and identity came from within, from above. Palm Sunday and Passion, two events that could change a self-image and alter an identity. But Jesus was undeterred. We face our Palm Sunday and our Passion, moments of pride and self-importance and times of doubt and insecurity. Let us have the mind of Christ. Know who you are.

-Pastor Kelly