

DISCOVERING LIFE-GIVING

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Sunday, April 14, 2019

Scripture: [Philippians 2:5–11](#)

SERMON

At its heart, to tell the story of Palm Sunday, you have to know something about parades. (possibly also extraordinarily polite horse theft.) Lucky for you and for me... I hate parades. And in the way of the world, there are something that can make you so uncomfortable that you cannot help but try and take them apart and understand why they make feel the way that they do... so I am also a pretty good scholar of parades... at least, religious ones. If you want to talk about funereal and Eucharistic processions of pre-and early reformation England and France... I am your guy... suffice to say, I am almost no one's guy.

In general, I have found that there are two types of parades, though... those for power or those for play. To be clear, I don't mean to come out the gate sounding like power is a bad thing, it's just the ability to act... but how it is wielded and worn makes a big difference. Think about your favorite sports team winning the championship... that's power. But then, think of a military "glorious" in victory. That is, too. Play, well, we know what that looks like: it looks like carnival, it looks a lot like various cultural parades we have these days...

Today is a little bit of both on Palm Sunday. To see Jesus, as he truly is, entering Jerusalem on a donkey, you have to see the shadow behind him... The shadow is of Pontius Pilate, riding on a warhorse, huge and powerful, flanked by Roman soldiers in formation. Your need to hear the sound of that earlier parade, with the thud of military might and the hollow shouts of a people who have been occupied and must perform adoration of the conquerors to hear the full weight of the Hosanna's—the *save us*—that met Jesus's parade.

It's stories like Palm Sunday that make me think Jesus was funny. Because just as much as he comes in "low to the ground" and of his people, he can't help but pull some satire on the powers that be from on high. Jesus is both underlining his own prophetic reign of peace, but also mocking the foolishness of the macho displays of might that would have been par for the course in his time.

Jesus knew how to poke fun... because that's how deflate those who puff themselves up, but in the way of deep satire, he also knew how to tell the truth.

The truth about real power is that it's always upside down of how we think it will go. The Hosanna's shouted at Jesus were real... they had the pleading of those who rejoiced at the possibility of God doing a new thing, and were a little flummoxed that God backed him up with a bunch of poor fisher-folk on foot rather than a rebel army on the march.

To help remind us of God's upside down-ness, the early church wrote a song. In fact, it wrote a song long before the Apostle Paul wrote a letter... so when he wanted to inspire his friends at the church in Philippi, Paul reached back and used a hymn that "everyone" knew to make his point. (Like all preachers, I'm sure Paul probably overestimated how much other people liked particular hymns...) But that's our reaching today, an ancient hymn of the church, calling out the wondrousness of Christ in choosing to be more fully human than we could even manage.

In the week to come, we will tell the story again of how broken our world can be. Of injustice, oppression, of an empire that knew all too well what to do with poor folk on the margin who dared to parade into the center of their power and mock it. We will also tell the story of how Jesus upset all of their expectations and illusions in how he chose to walk through those days of betrayal, desertion, abuse, and death.

Drained or Empty?

The Philippians hymn tells of Jesus "emptying himself." Even to the point of his death.

But there is a danger when we use this understanding of life-giving in certain ways.

I suppose a lot of how you read this text might be summed up by what you think of Shel Silverstein's "children's book", *The Giving Tree?*^[1] The story of a tree, who gives fruit, branches, trunk, stump to make a boy happy. At first blush this is exactly that "laying down our lives" kind of behavior. To many, what we have here is a story of an abusive relationship. The tree, (she, because of course it's a she) gives all of her life to a largely ungrateful boy who alternately takes all she has to offer and then abandons her.

And, with earth day on the way, this is exactly the model we seem to take with our planet sometimes, except the bad news is, we won't have anywhere else to go afterwards.

Too many people have been tempted in our history to simplify the story of Holy Week as "Jesus chose to die for us." There is, I know for me, something that happens to my understanding of death because Jesus (and hence, God) know the pain, and the tenderness of this life... Jesus grieved friends who died, and was grieved for... Death will be a part of this story, no matter what we do, because it is a part of our human story... and it is a miracle in and of itself that Jesus came to know what our lives are like... But...

I wonder though if we might hold our Christmas hope through the winter long enough to tell the story of the week to come from this frame: "Jesus *lived for us.*" Lived his life so fully for other people, that he didn't count the cost of life as too precious to risk for others.

That changes the story for me as a follower of Jesus.

Invitation

Because I know I will have very little control over how I die, it is refreshing to be invited by Jesus, by his parade, by this hymn of the ancient church to make some positive choices about how I will *live*. I wonder if we can think of emptying ourselves of our own self-importance, our self-seriousness, our own temptations towards power over others instead of power with them, our own pride or desire to trample.

The challenge comes to us then not to dismantle ourselves for the sake of others, but to more fully become exactly who we are, to nurture our own gifts and callings and selves, that they may be part of the richness of our life. Because Jesus did not come only to die, Jesus came to *live* and that life was precious, and wondrous, and mysterious.

I wonder if we wouldn't all do much better following a messiah who could tell the story of the giving tree so that we might live together shaded by each other's branches and fed by the fruits of who we are, and marveling at the wondrous love that could bear the powers of the world in order bring about the playfulness of paradise. This is why Pride Parades exist. This is why we show up and stand with others when they are attacked or humiliated and make the powers from on high... because together our refusal to give up our play can make those powers look as small as they are.

We need to find and join in parades of play and passion... pour out full lives without wondering the cost... Because with all those gifts, we can choose to live lives that mock the empires that crush life. We can choose to live lives that keep us at ground level, and not in the penthouses of power. We can choose to live lives: giving of our selves, our connections, our love, our humor... that makes space for the holiness within us and in others. Bring these with you through this holy week, for as Jesus told the disciples: the Lord needs them.

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1. For just a taste of how much division this book can cause, see a little back and forth between two reviewers:
[‘The Giving Tree’: Tender Story of Unconditional Love or Disturbing Tale of Selfishness?, *The New York Times*](#)
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