

BIBLE READINGS: Philippians 2:5-11 Mark 11:1-11

SERMON

A pall hangs over the celebration of Palm Sunday. Of course, the triumphant parade is grand, and we all love a parade. The shouts of Hosanna - the word means "save me" by the way and is related to the word "Jesus" - ring out strong and true. But those of us who have already heard the story know that before the week is over, things will become bitter and ironic. The cheers will turn to jeers. The crowd will turn nasty. Before long, Jesus will snatch defeat from the jaws of victory or so it will seem.

Of course, the defeat coming will in turn reverse itself. The ultimate victory will surprise, shock and distress. It will satisfy neither the cheers nor the jeers.

As is often the case, the cheers are just slightly misguided. The crowd does not quite understand what Jesus is about to do. The reason they - and we - all cheered the entry of Jesus into the city and felt as though we were on the threshold of an exciting new era was that we each thought he was going to be on our side, to be our leader, to advance our cause.

What turned the cheers to sneers of disgust and anger, was the discovery that what we had already had intimations of was really true: Jesus was determined to be on the side of everyone.

You simply can't do that in this world and expect to get away with it. In the world as we know it, you have to know the good guys from the bad guys and stay firmly with the good guys.

The most trouble I have ever had as a minister has been when I have tried to listen and support both sides of a conflict with fairness and equality. My position has been to let everyone, including those in the minority, get a chance to have their voice heard. To me, this is what being the body of Christ means – honouring the least and respecting their opinions as well as listening to the great and important. Being open and fair to all, I have thought, is a good way to build community and maybe encourage more teamwork and cooperation.

Well, you'd think at times I have committed some horrible crime for the reaction of some in my churches. This is no way to lead! Those who are different, those who believe differently, we need, according to some, to take every opportunity to belittle and discredit. (Often this was the opinion from both side of the discussion or debate)

This sense of fair treatment for those who oppose us is an alien concept and gets one in trouble with those normally in control of things. But think how we could transform the world if we could reverse the normal way of treating others? We are not without examples. John Winthrop, a great religious leader. He once solved a serious problem in a surprising way, reversing the normal approach to things. When it was reported to him during an especially long and hard winter that a poor man in his neighborhood was stealing from his woodpile, Winthrop called the man into his presence and told him that because of the severity of the winter and his need, he had permission to supply himself from Winthrop's woodpile for the rest of the cold season. Thus, he said to his friends, did he effectively cure the man from stealing. What a delightful way to solve a crime!

Victor Hugo tells a similar story in *Les Misérables*, about a paroled convict Val Jean, who stopped at the home of a priest and asked for something to eat. The priest invited him into his home, served him his finest wine, called for his housekeeper to set the table with the finest silver, and prepared his best meal. After supper he served his best brandy and cigars. He gave him a clean bed to sleep in that night. During the night the convict stole all the priest's table silver, and slipped out into the night.

The police arrested the convict, brought him back to the priest to identify the stolen silver. The priest thanked them for bringing him back, because in addition to the table silver which

he had given the convict, he had meant to give him his silver candlesticks which he then took off his shelf and gave to the convict. The rest of the novel is the story of how that encounter transformed the life of a convict.

Jesus was like this. He continually surprised his followers by taking sides with their enemies. This became a big problem for him. How does the saying go, "the friend of my enemy is also my enemy?" Defying this adage got Jesus in lots of trouble. Of course, defying the normal conventional approach to things is what the Bible is all about and Jesus is no exception. In this regard, one of the most troubling lessons of the Bible is that we should treat our enemies with respect and courtesy, since in many cases, and usually when we least expect it, God is on their side.

But those around Jesus would have none of this. If he is going to affirm the Romans in any way, Simon (the zealot), that courageous Hebrew freedom fighter, would have nothing more to do with him. Jesus does seem to take sides with the Romans at times, urging people to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and making it obvious that he has no intention of joining the Zealots who long for a violent revolution. Especially galling for some was that Jesus made no attempt to overthrow the Romans during his last visit to the city, as many hoped he would. In fact, he gave no defense to the charges against him and submitted in humility (and shame, some said) to the authority of the Roman occupying authorities. The Zealots were displeased to find that Jesus was not the revolutionary leader they thought they needed.

And the established religious community also had cause to be disappointed. If he is not going to be on the side of religious leaders who are struggling earnestly and even heroically to uphold the law of Moses, they are going to let him see the full force of their righteous indignation. And he persisted in openly refusing to side with them. He heals on the Sabbath. He makes claims which to them are blasphemous. He is continually poking a sharp stick in the eyes of those loyal to the conventional religious practices and beliefs of the day. No wonder the religious establishment gave up on him.

If he is not going to be on the side of Peter and James and John who are looking for a successful culmination to this movement they have joined, they are not going to stick with him, either. If he persists in these incomprehensible ways which are clearly endangering his own life as well as theirs, then he is going to have to go it alone without them. When the time of final decision comes, they will cut loose from him and deny that they ever knew him. Jesus makes no attempt to triumph over his enemies in the normal way and even his disciples are disappointed and fall away.

If he is going to be on the side of a no good criminal like Barabbas, worthy of crucifixion even by his own admission, and if he is going to let the crowds go without more of the miracles, bread and signs for which they had begun to follow him in the first place, the people are going to turn against him, too, angry at having been let down. Why did he lead them on with his wonderful healings and his feeding of thousands if he did not intend to keep on looking after them? They will decide that anyone that deceptive deserves to be whipped and strung up somewhere. At least Barabbas had not led them on like this Nazarene had! The folks got impatient when Jesus didn't turn out to be who they thought he was and wanted him to be.

The few days which followed the triumphant entry into Jerusalem will be full of disappointment for the followers of Jesus. He simply would not lead - at least not in the direction they wanted. This was a big problem for some of them!

Real heroes are like this. I have read recently about an iconic figure during the civil rights movement in America in the 60's. Will Campbell was a Baptist minister who wore a black wide-brimmed Amish hat and carried a hand-carved cane and drove a red pickup truck. He didn't have a church. He just preached and pastored wherever the opportunity presented itself.

The problem with Will Campbell was that he wouldn't make up his mind whose side he was on. He made enemies and friends all around.

His Baptist brothers and sisters wouldn't have anything to do with him because of his belief in integration and his association with civil rights people and "outside agitators."

One of those people, a young Anglican minister named Jonathan Daniel, was killed with a shotgun blast by Tom Coleman of Hayneville, Alabama, in 1966. An all-white jury found Coleman innocent, and Will Campbell shocked and alienated his civil rights friends by standing beside Coleman, the killer. He wrote, "Jonathan can never have died in vain, because he loved his killer - by his own last written words. And since he loved his murderer, his death is its own meaning. And what it means is that Tom Coleman, this man who pulled the trigger, is forgiven. If Jonathan forgives, then it is not for me to cry for his blood." What a shocking reaction to a horrible situation.

Will Campbell had the same trouble as Jesus getting people to follow in the direction he wanted to take them. Segregationists disowned Campbell because he would not lead their parade. Many civil rights people scorned him because he would not stay in line in their parade either.

Fundamentalists wouldn't have anything to do with him because he had a degree from Yale and was way too LIBERAL!

Liberals turned away from him because he did unacceptable things such as sitting up all night with Bob Jones in Granite Quarry, NC, the night before Jones was to go to prison. Jones was the Grand Dragon of the Klu Klux Klan.

The man got no real following because he was for everybody. You just can't do that and get away with it in the world as we know it. If you like everybody, nobody will like you.

If you are going to make it in this world, you have to choose your side. We all know from our earliest remembered moments at school, that taking sides is serious business. Who is whose friend and who is not is a matter of grave consequence. Anyone who has no friends or has all friends has gone beyond the pale.

Jesus didn't fare well with his contemporaries because he welcomed everyone to his table. He doesn't fare well, today, for the same reason.

Liberal Christians think Jesus is their leader, and when they see him sitting down with Assembly of God charismatics, they are discouraged.

Evangelical Christians think Jesus is their leader, and when they hear he is sitting down with atheists, they don't understand.

Straight Christians think he is their leader, and they are shocked and draw back from him when they see him move over to be with gay Christians.

The bad news is that we all forsake Jesus because he will not lead us in the way we are determined to go.

The good news is that he was not turned aside from his mission nor away from us by our rejection. He persevered in his all-embracing love, died for it and was raised to eternal life. Now, by trust in him, we can find the courage and the ability to rejoin his Palm Sunday procession and begin to reflect his spirit and his way.

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea;

There's a kindness in His justice,
which is more than liberty.
There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more felt than up in heaven;
There is no place where earth's failings
have such kindly judgment given.
For the love of God is broader
than the measure of man's mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more simple,
we should take Him at His word:
And our lives would be all sunshine
in the sweetness of our Lord.

Frederick W. Faber, 1854