

Competing Expectations

April 13, 2014

Matthew 21:1-11

Whether you keep up with the liturgical calendar or not, I suspect that when our choir entered carrying palm branches you immediately knew today was Palm Sunday. For those of you who have attended worship at this time for many years, our Scripture reading will be just what you have come to expect. As you listen to it, I invite you to imagine yourself within it as one who has chosen to participate in the parade.

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately. "

This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Holy One, help us to focus our thinking on your earthly existence – especially on your years of ministry leading up to a one of a kind parade on what we now call Palm Sunday. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Scholars rarely agree on much of anything, but when it comes to Palm Sunday there is a general consensus that this is the beginning of the final week of Jesus' earthly life – at least inasmuch as life had always been understood. If we lived back in this era, I think our individual decisions about whether or not to attend the parade would have been focused on our understanding of Jesus' ministry up until this moment.

We cannot really imagine ourselves as participants in this one of a kind celebration without having a richer understanding of just what this parade was all about. Think about it . . .

- No one printed and mailed personal invitations with reply cards to likely attendees.
- No one sent an e-mail to a list of Jesus' known followers.
- No one took out ads in the local newspaper or turned to social media to spread word of this unique opportunity.

So those who chose to travel that day and be a part of this unique experience did so very intentionally. It makes me wonder what might have inspired you to participate.

- Who would Jesus need to be to you?
- What would his ministry need to mean to you?
- How fully committed would you need to be to his message?

At this point, you may be unsure if you would have set aside the time to travel to and participate in the parade. Let me help you consider that decision based on what we know of Jesus' ministry to this point.

Let's review what we know of Jesus so far by focusing on 4 Ps: priorities, parables, prayers, and proposal.

For those of you who are annual residents or very early arriving snowbirds, you may remember that the first sermon series I preached as your Interim Senior Minister was on Jesus' priorities. I felt the best way to begin was by focusing on what mattered most to Jesus.

The idea for the sermon series came from a book by a Catholic lay person, Christopher Maricle, who has been involved in education for

his entire adult life.¹ He spent quite some time studying the Gospels to learn what Jesus invested his life in most significantly by tallying the number of times Jesus taught about or acted in a given way. When his work was done he had a list of Jesus' eight top priorities:

- heal,
- love,
- pray,
- spread the word,
- treasure in heaven,
- seek God's will,
- children are precious,
- and live with humility.²

Part of what makes this so fascinating is that Jesus' priorities are priorities he expects of himself and also of his followers. As a church that calls itself by the name the United Church, we strive for unity – a unity that ought to begin with that which Jesus prioritized.

While his priorities are helpful, they are inadequate for making a decision about whether or not you would have chosen to attend the Palm Sunday affair. So, in order to help you make a more educated choice let's consider Jesus' parables.

Did you know that more than 1/3 of Jesus' recorded teaching is in the form of parables? It was his favorite way to teach.

Parables are stories that grab your attention, and continue to hold it long after the story ends. Many include an unexpected twist; it is only after that surprise turn happens that the key elements of meaning appear.

In the case of Jesus, most of his parables are about a single topic: the kingdom of God – which is now often referred to as the realm, reign, or kin-dom of God. Jesus' parables compare God's realm to something common in this world. Perhaps you recall some of the more obvious

¹ Christopher Maricle. *The Jesus Priorities: Eight Essential Habits* (Upper Room Books, 2007).

² For more on the topic of Jesus Priorities read my e-Book: *The Jesus Priorities* (2013), available online at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/188385964/The-Jesus-Priorities>

accounts – those that begin the kingdom of God is like . . . a mustard seed, treasure hidden in a field, or a small amount of yeast.

Some of Jesus' parables are so powerful and timeless that they are known by many who have no real connection to Christianity, including the Prodigal Son(s) and the Good Samaritan.

The content of these parables is timeless; they are just as important for present day followers of the Way of Jesus as they were for first century followers of Jesus. They are so very simple yet can take a lifetime to understand. This is why they form yet another part of the decision making matrix for our Palm Sunday parade.

While you continue weighing Jesus' parables, let me introduce you to our third "p" word: prayer. Even though most Christians have historically understood the earthly Jesus to be both fully human and also fully divine, he was a person of prayer.

The Gospels portray Jesus as a person committed to a life of prayer, and as one who teaches others to pray. Jesus teaches about or models a life of prayer around 30 times in the Gospels. He expects that those who follow him will be known as people who pray.

Because Jesus was born and raised in a Jewish family, he grew up praying. During his ministry, he built on this and extended beyond it by constructing new prayers, including a model prayer which is known today by most Protestants as the Lord's Prayer and by most Catholics as the Our Father.

The Lord's Prayer impacts our perspective more than any other prayer ever spoken by anyone. It is a clear way we identify with Jesus, and live into the vision he had and has for humanity. In this church it is the custom not only to pray it each time we gather for worship, but also many Boards and Committees pray it at the conclusion of each meeting. It is something many individuals pray on a daily basis or even more frequently.

We know the words well, even if we don't always slow down enough to reflect on what each means. It is helpful to remember that this is a powerful prayer and includes not one or two but seven petitions. The first half of these focus on God and the second half focus on us. Jesus is modeling for us the importance of prayer – prayer that connects us to the Source and helps us live well in our everyday lives.

Jesus' life of prayer and teachings on prayer have to be among your key data points as you move toward making a decision about whether or not to turn out for the palm parade. I want to be sure you also weigh another factor: his proposal.

While Jesus never called it his proposal, I think it is safe to assume he meant the Great Commandment as such. Remember that as someone who was raised a Jew, he knew all about God's commandments. There were, of course, the 10 Commandments. Additionally, there were 613 different rules within the Torah that were to be observed.

Jesus changed everything and invites his disciples to live by what is known today by most Christians as the Greatest Commandment:

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."³

Christianity is all about loving God, and loving your neighbor as yourself – a lifelong lesson that also includes learning that everyone is your neighbor. Jesus is inviting you to accept this proposal.

But . . . I keep returning to the parade. Our parade this morning was pretty basic, but it included enough visual impact to help you connect with the story. Some of you have been in congregations that take the palm processional to the next level and involve everyone. In those services, rather than finding your seat when you arrive you remain outside holding a palm frond. Only when worship begins do all of God's people process as they wave palm fronds.

I don't know about you, but for me considering these four seems like enough to make a decision about whether or not I would have made my way to participate in the parade. Before I ask if you would be willing to place it on your calendar, let me offer a little historical context for this event.

³ Mark 12:28-31

When we think of parades today we tend to think of relatively fun affairs that are a big draw to a wide audience. The media covers them as feel good events that contribute to community spirit.

We need to think of this parade differently. Before you decide to accept or reject your invitation to the Palm Sunday parade you need to know that it wasn't the parade that was happening on that day – in fact, it was "the other parade."

The main parade – the one everyone was abuzz about – entered the city from the west. It featured "Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea and Samaria" at "the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers." It was an impressive sight to behold, and a "demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology."⁴ As the military might entered the city onlookers would see troops, horses, helmets, weapons, and golden eagles atop poles and hear the beating of drums and marching of feet.⁵

Our parade – the Palm Sunday affair – was a total contrast. It featured Jesus on a donkey and his disciples approaching Jerusalem from the opposite direction – from the east. It is the first time in Matthew's gospel that Jesus has been associated with being or becoming a king. Jesus' procession would not frighten anyone. The shouts of those who were there were enough, however, to cause people to pause and consider who Jesus really was: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"⁶

Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan put this in perspective:

"Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God."⁷

I can't take you back some 2000 years to give you the opportunity to choose which parade to attend or even if you would have ventured out to see either. I do, however, suggest that as we enter Holy Week you take the time to figure out who Jesus is in your life.

Amen.

⁴ Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem* (HarperOne, 2006), p.2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁶ Matthew 21:9

⁷ Borg and Crossan., p.4.