

March 29, 2015

“Risking Forgiveness: The Things That Make for Peace”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 19:26-32

“I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.”

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, “Why are you untying it?” just say this: “The Lord needs it.”’ So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them.

Palm Sunday is definitely one of the most fun days of the whole year. Grown-ups get to act like kids in church. I know some of you feel a little self-conscious about this, but please, go ahead and wave away! This is our day to remember that King Jesus is hailed as a mighty king and welcomed as a savior.

Part of the reason we feel embarrassed is not only that we are a bit inhibited! It’s that we know the whole story. And we know that we, the crowds who hail him today are the very people who will deny him tomorrow. We know that the adulation he enjoys today will turn to scorn. We know that the palms we wave today will be burned to make the very ashes that will remind us of our sin and brokenness. Mixed emotions, indeed. Laughter and tears. Rejoicing and sorrow. It’s strange, really, that a seemingly simple story of Jesus riding along on a donkey while crowds of children and grown-ups waved branches and shouted “Hosanna” can carry such complex emotional drama.

Scripture is holy because it tells the truth of our lives, the whole truth, even as it points us to the truth much larger and deeper and truer that comes from the heart of our God. Never be fooled by the apparent simplicity of a Bible story. It is never that shallow and it is rarely simple. Like poetry, it reminds us of larger truths. It is big enough to hold our heart and save our soul.

This Lent, we’ve been walking together the path of forgiveness. We’ve preached about it, talked with one another about it, prayed about it, been led through our Lenten devotionals to reflect upon it. Many of you have spoken with me about what hard work it is. And yet, even so, have we not also caught a glimpse of its liberating power, its healing balm? When we are able to forgive—to forgive another, to forgive ourselves, to forgive God—even just a little, even as a longing we cannot yet achieve, we feel the release of the fist unclenched, the burdensome stone laid down, the heart opening to new life. This has been our spiritual work this Lent.

The journey continues this morning as we join Jesus’ procession into Jerusalem. And as he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, the Scripture tells us. And he said: “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” Jesus is teaching us in this moment. He’s reminding us that the forgiveness he offers, the forgiveness he purchases through the giving of his own life, is forgiveness not only for individuals, but is forgiveness that is to extend to cities, to the centers of power, to nations. The kingdom of God encompasses the whole of life, the whole world and everything in it. From top to bottom, from the inside out, from micro to macro, the new life Christ brings is not only for our personal restoration. It is for the reconciliation of the world. The kingdom of God which Jesus proclaims is about this world transformed by justice, reconciliation, forgiveness and peace. He longs for us to understand. If only you knew, he said, weeping...if only you knew the things that make for peace...

Jesus enters Jerusalem, the holy city, yearning for the things that make for peace. Knowing that the cross awaits. We have here the central meaning of what his message is all about. The cross of Christ pulls us into reconciliation with everything from which we have been separated.

At the heart of the cross, forgiveness and reconciliation. Its horizontal beams connect us to one another across all barriers of race and culture, language and gender, custom and nationality. The horizontal beam of the cross makes us one with one another in such a strong and powerful way that we cannot deny our common humanity and our common destiny.

And its vertical beam connects us to God, to the living source of healing and salvation. The vertical beam connects us with the suffering and risen Christ in such a strong and powerful way that we need never give in to the despair of the world.

In the cross, hate is overcome by love and all brokenness overcome by forgiveness. In the cross, despair is overcome by hope. In the cross, we are forgiven and we are made whole. We are reconciled to one another and to all God's children, and we are reconciled to God. These are the things that make for peace.

The procession moves forward and pulls us along with it. Still we disciples struggle to understand, to open our eyes and see, to open our hearts and hear what he is trying to teach us.

This is indeed an auspicious day on which to receive new folks into membership. It would be easy were we simply saying—"hey, come join the parade!" But, truth in advertising here. There's more to this than meets the eye. This is a day in which we all encounter the full measure of what it means to take up the cross and follow him. We're waving our palms, but we're also thinking about what that cross means for our lives and for this hurting world.

For some time, we've been talking about church membership in terms of belonging: belonging to one another, belonging to God in Christ, belonging to this way of living and being in the world and for the world. We choose to belong together because we need one another to walk this path, to help us keep our eyes and hearts open. We choose to belong to one another because we need one another's support and encouragement and prayer and love. We belong to God together because we know our need of God's word in Christ Jesus—and not just the easy parts, the reassuring parts, the beautiful parts, but the words that are hard to hear. The challenging words, the disturbing words that draw us beyond our comfort zones into deeper levels of faith and commitment, words such as this morning's story brings.

Plaintive words, bathed in tears, that call us to remember the things that make for peace. For Jesus enters the city not to conquer Jerusalem, nor Rome, but to conquer sin and death. To heal all brokenness and despair. He rides down that path to bring the fulfillment of hope and make real the promise of life made ever new. For he IS the Way, the Truth and the Life, and in him is the reign of God begun.

Does any of this, this knowing or this belonging, provide easy answers to our questions? No. Does it cause all the pieces of our life to fall into place? Not necessarily. But it does put us on the path together, the path on which we, like Jesus, can be confident of finding direction and strength for the journey. It sorts out our priorities and keeps God front and center. It calls us into a life of prayer like his, a life loving service and willing sacrifice for others. It leads us into the way of the Lord, the way of prayer and praise, of worship and fellowship.

About half-way down the Mount of Olives one finds a small teardrop shaped chapel called Dominus Flevit—Latin for "the Lord weeps." It is said to be the place where Jesus wept over the city. Pilgrims heading into Jerusalem stop here for prayer and the celebration of Holy Communion. As they prepare to enter a city still divided, still torn by violence, still long from real peace, they hear again his words: my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sin, my body broken for you. They share his tears, and they set their sights on a new kingdom, where God's will is done on earth as in heaven.

As the journey continues, may we all, with our new members this day, rededicate ourselves to be the disciples Jesus calls and empowers us to be— repairers of the breach, restorers of streets to live in. As the Isaiah puts it, agents of healing and reconciliation, channels of grace, champions of hope, and makers of peace.

Notes:

William G. Carter in Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol. 2. Bartlett and Taylor, eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

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