

Matthew 21:1-13

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 fulfil 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.'

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers.'

"The Cheering Crowd"

Rev. Charles Schuster

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This is about the 30-I don't know, 35th Palm Sunday sermon I've written. I consider myself somewhat an expert on the subject. It's always been kind of fun to preach, I mean, how can it not be? You're waving palm branches, you're singing about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Makes me think of marching bands and parades. Sometimes in a slow moment in a worship service, I'll look out into the congregation and I'll try to imagine you all dressed up in your high school colors, and with those high hats covered with rodent skin, and a plume of fake feathers on the top of it. And I begin to ask myself, who among you, when you were in high school, would have played the flute or the clarinet. I know that we've got piccolo players out there. I know there are drummers, and some of those drums are big drums you hit with a hammer club, and others are little snare drums. I can see some of you marching with that big python tuba wrapped around yourself. And I know we've got some drum majors out there, strutting down the street with a whistle in their mouth, blowing it every chance they get. And some pom-pom people, and a gaggle of twirlers.

Never been in a marching band, never twirled a baton, never strutted down a street, and I don't do pom-poms or flags. Or trombones, they took that away from me, but that's a sad saga you already know. But I was in a parade one time, it was a Thanksgiving day parade, it was the first and frankly, as far as I know, the last Thanksgiving parade in the history of the city. Morgantown, West Virginia. Not much to do in Morgantown, West Virginia. Former Vice President Dick Cheney said of Morgantown, the only thing to do there is mine coal and molest animals. Well, one year they had this Thanksgiving Day

parade and they rented this helium-filled balloon animals, I guess some of the kind that you molest, I don't know. And the paid some of those high-school jocks five bucks to hold onto some ropes, and so Scotty Clark and Hayden Jones and Andrew Fasnaker and Bruce Snodgrass and I, we got to bring Dumbo the elephant balloon, ten feet off the ground, in sleet that finally turned to snow, followed by the mountaineer marching band alumni contingent, and they weren't all sober, followed by a flat-bed truck that had Santa Claus miked up, ho-ho-ing his way in a rocking chair, down High Street. Ahead of us was the Almost Heaven Horse Rescue Team, and that's when I learned something about parades. Try not to put yourself behind anything equestrian. Sorry, Curtis, and don't, if you find yourself there, be careful where you step.

It's great fun for the children waiting for Santa Claus right behind us, watching Dumbo in the snow. Palm Sunday is like a parade, I thought, a fun day. 30-some sermons, there would have been more, but you had cantatas sometimes, the choir wanted to sing on Palm Sunday and I didn't get to preach. I thought I understood Palm Sunday until I read something Fleming Rutledge said in her book *The Gospel and the New York Times*. She wrote, "Palm Sunday is a very strange day. The proper name for the Sunday is "the Sunday of passion." It begins in celebration and ends in catastrophe. We come in joyful and we go out stricken. It is not a day for the faint of heart, and it may be the most important Sunday of the year."

That's what made me take a second look, and so I have. This is what Palm Sunday tells us. If we really read the text, there are some things... it's subtle, but it's there. I think you can see it. Let me try to show you. First of all, saying to us, you've got to consider what you cheer. The text says, Matthew tells us, Jesus mounted the donkey and her foal. Two animals. I don't know what to do with that part of the text. So we'll move on. Crowds of people carpeted the road with cloaks and some cut branches from the trees and spread them on his path. The crowd that went before, the crowd that came after began shouting "Hosanna to the son of David." Matthew is telling us something here. Look at what you're shouting. Whom do you cheer? Matthew writing thirty years after the events or longer, Matthew knew that we would know what was wrong with that cheering. We would know that. The readers would know "Hosanna," save us now, Hosanna, Son of David, blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord to save us from the Romans. He came in the name of the Lord, but not to do what they wanted him to do. He did not come as a military leader. What they were cheering was not what he was there to do. Be careful, when you cheer, what you say.

Nettie and Fred Craddock moved to Atlanta where he was going to teach at Emory University in the seminary there, Chandler School of Theology. It was, oh I don't know, fifty years ago. That September they invited Nettie and Fred to a party, following a University of Georgia football game. Lots of people were there, 35 or so, and they were all in their thirties and forties, well-dressed, with the kind of clothing that says "How 'bout them dogs?" It was an exciting thing. The host and hostess put out sandwiches and drinks. They began introducing themselves around, so Fred and Nettie would feel welcome. Fred tells it this way. He said,

"There was this attractive woman there. I didn't know her name. She looked a little too bejeweled and overdressed to have come just from a football game, but dripping with success, as was her husband. She stood up in the middle of all that, while we were getting into the party, and she said, 'I think we ought to sing the Doxology,' and before we could take a vote, she started singing it, and a few others started singing, and they sang with gusto, and some of us stood there counting our shoelaces. When she finished singing the Doxology, she said, mostly to the men, 'You can talk all you want about running back Herschel Walker, but you know what got us to victory today. It was Jesus.' And someone said, 'Do you really believe that?' And she said, 'Of course I do. Jesus said, 'Whatever you ask, ask in my name I'll give it to you,' and so I said, 'Jesus, I want more than anything else in the world that we would win.' Some of us," Fred continues, "some of us moved to other parts of the house. I walked toward the kitchen. Someone came over to me and asked, 'Do you think she's drunk?' and I said, 'I don't know, I just moved here.' The hostess came over and said, 'If she doesn't shut her mouth, she's going to ruin my party.'"

Sometimes we get carried away, and the people line the streets, and the people sing their doxologies, and Jesus rode the donkey into town. Yesterday there was an article in the paper, a soapbox article, Jenice Cutler wrote it. She tells about taking her eighth-grade daughter to school one day. She turns on the radio and there's this song. Jenice says, "I'm fairly easy-going. I'm not inclined to over-react to things, but it was a song with lyrics that were so intensely graphic and violent, I just felt ambushed. It's called ET by Katie Perry. Kanye West is the featured artist. It's says, "Ima disrobe ya, then I'm gonna probe ya, see I've abducted ya, so I will tell you what to do. I will tell you what to do, what to do, what to do." She said, "My daughter's at the stage in her life where she's discovering her place in the world. She hears these lyrics day in and day out, lyrics that say to me it's fine, it's normal, even desirable for a man to exploit you and abuse you and abduct you, and exert power over you. Oh, I know these lyrics are not any worse than any other song out there, and I know I allow my children to be exposed to a great deal of unhealthy influences in their day-to-day life through the media."

What's implied? Jenice is so right about it. There comes a time when we look at what we listen to, to see what we join in to. To think about what we tolerate by our lack of objection. Jenice is right, and so's Matthew. We've got to take a look at what we cheer, and what we hear, so we do not join in what we do not believe. The crowd had no idea, when they cheered "Hosanna, save us now." Let's be careful what we cheer.

Secondly, let's be sure who we are. In that Palm Sunday story, in Matthew's account, when Jesus entered Jerusalem the whole city was wild with exaltation, and then people ask, "Who is it, who is this?" They didn't know. But the followers of Jesus, asking about Jesus, "Who is this?" really are asking, "Who are we?" Sometimes, Christian people get so full of Jesus they forget who Jesus was. And we live in a culture of winners and winning, and we are people of privilege, for the most part. Erma Bombeck wrote this article years ago about the violent images in sports pages. She says, "No one ever just wins a game. You crush, you stomp, you trounce, you bomb, you outclass, you overthrow, you hammer, you victimize. Nobody ever just wins." She said, "I'd like to see this, and probably will, in my lifetime, carry over to the society page. How Betty

Schmidlap, cruised by four ugly bridesmaids on a Saturday afternoon at St. Mary's Church to overpower her opponents and tap victory at the altar in the matrimonial upset of the year."

Sometimes we forget that Jesus was a gentle Galilean and we put him up as a superstar who's better than others and who came to have us praise him. He's number one, and if we believe in him, so are we. See, the question, "Who do you think Jesus was?" is really a question for Christians that asks, "Who are we, and who do we think we are?" And if we imagine Jesus to be some kind of dominating avenger or an angry conspirator, then we ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" and we mistakenly justify behavior that's not Christian. Who Jesus is, if we're Christian, to us, helps us know who we are. Sometimes we forget the real Jesus in moments of exuberation. Garrison Keillor put this in perspective, it's on a different level, but I think you'll get it.

"Every few years the King and Queen of Norway pay a visit to Minnesota, and they are driven around to Lutheran colleges and churches and old folks' homes and museums where they inspect the rose painting and the hand-made lace, and try to make about forty appearances in four days. And each appearance, they wave to the crowds of blue-eyed geezers and listen to a choir of flaxen-haired children in 18th-century peasant costumes singing unintelligible Norwegian songs about maidens gathering birch boughs that nobody in Norway has sung for the last hundred years. And then the King and Queen of Norway are given big platters of pickled herring and they sit through speeches about the heroism and industry and faith of immigrants, and after four days of this pounding punishment, they fly them back home to Oslo where they are whisked back to the palace, where they change into their jeans and t-shirts, open a bottle of white Bordeaux, out on a Mariah Carey CD, and fix themselves a plate of chicken quesadillas and a green salad and look at each other and say to each other, 'Who in hell were those people?'" They couldn't be Norwegian.

Who are we? Who is he? Saw a really good movie this weekend, *The Conspirator*. Really good. It's about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the people who killed him, and after the president was murdered, they rounded up all the people responsible, including a Mary Surratt who ran the boarding house where the plot was hatched. Mary was not involved, but she was arrested and eventually executed, and Frederick Aiken was her lawyer, and the tension in the movie is the tension between those who want to go ahead and convict Mary, so as to calm the fears and anxieties of the nation, and in contrast to that, there's Aiken, who keeps reminding people of the rule of law. And the question is raised, can Mary Surratt get a fair trial, given the climate of fear, and the further question, who are we as a people if she can't? And she couldn't.

Who's Jesus? Is he a king? No. Is a power or force? No, not in respect of coercion. Who are his followers? Palm Sunday forces us to ask ourselves, do we proclaim the triumphal Christ, or do we remember the gentle Jesus? Who is he? Who are we? Whom do we cheer, first of all. Who are we?

The third Palm Sunday question raises is, what do we do when we see something wrong? What do we do? Jesus saw people in the temple, money-changers blocking common people out of the temple, and he did something. He turned over the tables. If we see something wrong, you know, you act. You do something about it. You may not be able to change history, and it may be true that you're locked in the present, but you can do something about the future. We can. We can change it. It's what Helen Broderick meant when she called her insurance company to change the beneficiaries on her policy, and she said, "Because I just had twins." The insurance agent didn't quite hear her, so he said, "Would you repeat that, please?" and she said, as she took a deep breath, "Not if I can help it." Something to think about.

It's on the annual conference Rocky Mountain Methodist website. Something to think about. I'll ask you to look at it. If you like, I'll tell you where it is. They like to put on the annual conference website historical facts, to keep us connected with Methodists. And this week, if you look on the conference webpage, they will tell you, did you know that two members of the string quartet that played while the Titanic was sinking were Methodists? Two musicians played on. The ship's going down, but they played music, and on one level, that's heroic. On another level, I would like to think that Methodists, as people who, when the ship or the country or the denomination is sinking, would put down their instruments and get in the middle of it and try to help maybe save a life or load a lifeboat, you know? Our motto ought to be, "Don't just stand there, do something." Not, "Don't just do something, stand there."

Quentin Crisp offered his speculation, his sort of motto of life, when he said, "My purpose in life is to render clear what is already blindingly conspicuous." Certainly, Jesus was one who approached life in that way. To render clear what was blindingly conspicuous. People knew it, he just said it. Hans Kuhn said "Jesus was attacked on all sides because he hadn't played many of the expected roles. For the silent majority, he was too noisy; for the noisy minority, he was too quiet; he was too gentle for the strict and too strict for the gentle," and I think that's right. Seems to me one of the truths that comes out of the Palm Sunday message and story suggests that the story would have had a happy ending if the people who cheered him would have done something to protect him from the people who didn't like who he was.

I know some will say, it's best, at times to leave things the way they are and let them work themselves out. Sometimes that's right, and you can cite such truth. Winston Churchill, for example, lived into his nineties, and he said the only exercise he ever got was being a pallbearer for his friends who died while they were exercising. But I think you do something about your health, you work out. We got this group in the church called the Green Team. They decided we were wasting paper and other recyclable items, and what we were calling trash could be compostable, and so they come to the church several times a week, they sort through our trash, until we get the idea that we can do better than we're doing. These are dignified church members, sifting through the garbage. And I admire them. You do something. You do something about it when you see something wrong in your church, in your town, in your country, in the world. Just to

stand there and do nothing leads to being in the wrong place at the wrong time. You move, you act. You do something.

Palm Sunday is a very special day. It does begin in celebration. It does end in catastrophe. We come in joyful, we go out stricken. This day is not for the faint of heart. It is, I think the most important Sunday of the year, because the forces were beginning to gather to silence him. Nobody wants to look at why we cheer or who we are or what we do, and the forces then and the forces now begin to think of ways to kill the messenger and quiet the message. They used force, they employed the ultimate weapon, and in the end they put him on a cross and it was over, and the questions were quieted. The cross was planted, the plot was planned, the catastrophic twist would begin and bring closure to all those questions and more. They did it. They always tried to do it, and they did it, and they used the ultimate weapon and they killed the questioner and silenced the question. Just one thing they didn't count on, and they never do... They always underestimate God.