

Mark 11: 1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, “Why are you doing this?” just say this, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.” ’ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,
‘Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

“Claim Our Faith”**Rev. Joel Kershaw****April 5, 2009**

Grace be yours, and peace, from Jesus Christ our Lord.

Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday has always been a bit of a cognitive dissonance for me. On the one hand, you have people expressing faith in Jesus in dramatic fashion. Laying out their coats and their palm branches before the Lord. Treating him like a king on the way to coronation. But on the other hand, we know, as 21st-century Christians, that not only do we fall short of coronation, but Jesus is hanging on the cross by the end of the week. What are we to make of the example of these believers? Were they disappointed by Jesus’ lack of fight? Were they unable to stop the political machine bent on killing him? Were they scared into submission by the brutality of the Romans and misplaced justice?

Maybe all of the above. But in the midst of questions, I believe we can find a call. A call to claim our faith, to take off our coats and to take our palms and proclaim our faith in the midst of uncertainty. We gather as the body of Christ to bear witness to that very thing this morning, claiming the faith. Today is also Confirmation Sunday. These young people here in the front two pews have put up with me for the last seven months, they’ve done all that I’ve asked them to do, which is a lot. Just ask them. And they’re here now to proclaim their faith, to join this congregation. What might these young people glean? What might they learn from the example of Jesus’ contemporaries this day?

The first thing I think we need to ask is why. Why should we claim our faith? There’s something to be said for modesty in times of turmoil. I can imagine some of these followers getting caught up in the moment of Jesus arriving. They throw their coats down

on the ground and they shout hosannas, only to lay low on Good Friday. Who could blame them? Even Peter the Rock denies Jesus on that cold night. Who are we to say we'd do any differently? There was some talk among the staff several weeks ago of maybe the potential for First United Methodist Church bumper stickers. Anybody interested? Well, before you answer, one of the glaring problems with FUMC bumper stickers was, do you really want the person you just cut off to know where you go to church? Do you really want that police officer that caught you doing ninety on I-25 to know where you go to church? Well, I got first-hand knowledge of that a few years ago. Some of you may remember. Driving in the church van, on a well-intentioned mission trip to Mississippi, and a lovely state trooper that took pity on me and my twenty youth, and gave me a warning instead of a ticket. Do we really want those people to know where we go to church?

The truth is that we hesitate to claim our faith because we know that faith asks much of us. There are high expectations for people of faith, and those expectations can be hard to live up to. So why claim it? Why take on that extra responsibility? For this we turn to Jesus' instructions to the disciples as he sends them off to "borrow" the colt. Can you imagine that, "borrow" the colt? It'd be like someone coming up to you and saying, "Yeah, we'd like to borrow your car. We'll bring it back, I promise. It's for the Lord. We're good." He tells them, if anyone asks them, to say the Lord has need of it. "The Lord has need of it." The reality is that claiming our faith is not always going to be the easy thing to do. It's not always going to be the proper thing to do, or the popular thing to do. It might not even be the shrewd or even the advisable thing to do. But nevertheless, we are called to claim it all the same. We are called to claim it even when it does not seem prudent or does not seem to matter, because simply, God has need of us. Just like that colt. The Lord has need of us.

When I was a youth, not too long ago, our youth group in Pueblo cooked up a musical called "The Big Picture," based on the musical "Michael W. Smith." It's a fascinating story about a young couple who gets in a car wreck, high school students, and the girl is killed, and sees the aftermath of the accident from the perspective of heaven, being guided by an angel appropriately named Angel, originally known. The other person in the car is a strapping young man, the star of the football team, ready to go to college and take on the sports world, who is paralyzed in the accident and spends the musical in a hospital bed. And we worked this musical up pretty well. We thought, we're going to take it on the road. So our youth group decided our mission trip that year would be to take this musical to small churches in Northwest Texas that wouldn't typically get a tour group through their church. So we called up small Methodist churches along the way, and we found several that would be willing to host us, and off we went. A couple of dates into our trip, we got a call from one of our upcoming stops. Something had happened, and they couldn't accommodate our group any more. But there's this church down the way that just might be able to take it, this next town over. So we called them up, and the pastor had called ahead so he was expecting us, and he said "Sure, come on down. It's kind of late notice," it was the next day, "so I don't now how many people we can get, but come anyway, you'll have a good time." So we went, and we unloaded our stuff and set up our sets and we tuned up our instruments and we performed that night, to four

people. Now, we performed like it was a packed house, but it was to four people, and afterwards, we started to discover some things about this small town we had happened upon. There had been a car accident that had claimed the lives of six youth from that community, just that spring, and what's worse, three of the four people that were there that night were related to people killed in that accident. I don't know why we were there. To this day I don't understand what happened to us in that small Texas town. But I now that the Lord had need of our little group. I know the Lord has need of us.

That's the thing about God. You never know when God might need to you claim your faith. Moses never saw the burning bush coming, but God had need of him. David never imagined he'd be slaying the giant when he left his flocks, but God had need of him. The disciples were happily tending life's demands when Jesus came and revealed that God had need of them. And Jesus himself may or may not have understood it completely, but one thing's for certain, God had need of him. We may never see it coming. We may never be able to sense when we are called to reveal God's healing love to broken spirits, or when we might be needed as instruments of grace in this world, but we stand up and claim our faith, because always, everywhere, God has need of us. That is why we claim our faith.

Now, the second question we might look at is how? How are we to claim our faith? Are we to attend church regularly? Being sure that when we do, to fill out the attendance pads with such great precision, so as to leave no doubt that we have properly claimed our faith for that week. Or are we to dedicate ourselves to reading the Bible more, only to get somewhere in the middle of the "begats" and give up, firmly believing that if God wanted us to read the Bible, God would make all those names more pronounceable. Or maybe, just maybe, you might commit to diligently trying to understand just what on earth your clergy are preaching about, only to get lost in the third run-on sentence and forget the whole thing, thinking God must give gold stars for trying, while deeply contemplating just how many Sundays you can now eagerly commit to teaching Sunday school. Now in the midst of all that, just how to we to proclaim our faith? How?

For this we must turn to our palm-waving, hosanna-singing people. These were not rich people. They were likely pilgrims, making their way to Jerusalem and the temple, to celebrate the Passover. They needed to secure lodging, they needed to find food, they needed to buy their lambs for the sacrifice. They were busy people. These pilgrims of modest means get word that Jesus is coming to Jerusalem, and they prepare a king's welcome for their teacher, for their Lord. They see him riding the colt and they take off their coats, and they spread them on the ground in front of him, singing praises to God. These modest pilgrims gave of themselves freely, and without hesitation, to the Lord. This is not a calculated gesture. There was no effort to evaluate just how much they could or should give to celebrate the arrival of Jesus. The Scripture does not report that some people, seeming rather fond of their coats, went out into the fields and retrieved palm branches instead. No, these people gave of themselves, completely, of all they had to protect them, without cold calculation, to determine if they could get by on something less. Without seeking to determine if they could get a bargain.

And how are we to claim our faith? Freely, without measure, without cost/benefit analysis predicting return. The group that I lead now took a mission trip to Mississippi, the one I got stopped on. While we were there, we were building a house with this couple, and they worked as security guards. She worked the day shift, and he worked the night shift, so they barely saw each other, but we were rebuilding their home for them, and one day she got home from work. We were just finishing up for that day, and she came in, and she said, "Can I ask you a favor?" "Sure, why not?" She said, "I'm singing at church on Sunday. I haven't sung in years, but I just felt moved, I need to sing for church, but I'm a little nervous. Can I try it out on you?" Some of the youth here will probably remember this. And she disappeared and she came back and she stood in the middle of her half-built home, and she sang. She sang, and it was beautiful. It wasn't perfect, it didn't have to be. It didn't have to be. She sensed a gift that she had, a gift to give, and it didn't matter that every note wasn't in tune, and it didn't matter that the timbre of her voice wasn't completely pleasing to the human ear, but it was her passion. She gave of herself freely. She exposed herself to this group of strange youth that were building her home. She laid it on the line, and she sang for us. I can only assume she did the same for her congregation. But that's the kind of passion we need. That's the kind of free and unchecked giving that we need. We need to give of ourselves freely and without measure. We are called to claim our faith by responding to the needs of the world in any way that we can. Any way that we can offer.

Now finally, this might seem a little out of order, but we must examine the "who." Who is called to claim faith? Is it these twenty kids up front? Is it the balcony? I know you chose that place for a reason. Probably there were no seats down here. Who is to claim our faith? It's not the person sitting next to you, it's you. And as we learned from our District Superintendent last week, it's me. Right, Pastor? I need to hear this too. It's you, it's me. It's not the nice retired couple next door with all that extra time. It's you. It's not those spirited young people with all their endless energy. It's you. It's not the people who have always done it and will continue to do it until they drop, it's you. Getting the idea? It's you, and it's me. You and I need to claim our faith. That's the "who."

Jesus wasn't interested in what we brought to the table, he only cared that we brought it. Jesus wasn't interested in a list of virtues and references and prior work experiences and mailing addresses and bank statements and congressional confirmation, God help us, Jesus wasn't interested in what you brought along with you. He wanted you to know what you could bring. That is why he eats with tax collectors and calls on fishermen and associates with people of questionable character. He saw in them the potential for something good, that same potential that rests with each of us. We need only respond. We need only respond.

I mentioned in the announcements this morning that we're raising money to build a Habitat for Humanity house. Several years ago we had a 30-hour famine, we just completed one last week, we had one a few years ago, and we invited Glen Goth to come and speak to us about Habitat for that event. He brought with him a mother and a daughter, and they shared with us their experience. I thought I knew what Habitat was about. I thought I knew - building homes for people who don't have them. That seems

simple enough. But as I learned that night, Habitat is, as Glen would say, not a hand-out, but a hand-up. You see, people have to put in work on their own homes, or other people's homes. People have to get counseling on how to manage their money. They have to commit in ways that you or I would never be expected to commit. And they're handed a loan, at the end of that time, to pay for their home, that they have to pay off, just like all of us. It's not a hand-out, it's a hand up. And we don't hand out, we give people a hand up because we see the potential in them, because Habitat for Humanity looks at someone with a job and a family, who needs a place to live, and they say, "We see potential in you."

Well, God sees potential in all of us. We just need someone to believe in us. We can be both of those at the same time. We can be the people who need someone to believe in us, but we can be the people who believe in others. We can be people claiming our faith. But we cannot stop there, not as individuals. It's not really that you are called to claim your faith, or that I am called to claim my faith, but that we are called to claim our faith. We are not meant to be isolated, individual islands of faith in this world. We are called to be in community with God and each other. We are called to pool our collective energies, that we might be the movers of mountains. We are called to lovingly embrace our differences and learn from our unique perspective so that we can never delude ourselves into thinking we know it all, because we can't. Christ calls us to be the body. Not the ear, not the eye because we like to see, or the feet because we like to move around, or not the nose, even though we'd stop and smell the roses if the snow wasn't covering them. We are called to be the church, the body of Christ, everywhere and always, called to claim our faith in all its complexity, all its messiness, its confusing, beautifully complicated, inherently human, God-inspired insanity. That's what you're getting into. We find this model for us in the Scriptures in those crowds lying their coats and the branches on the ground. One coat in the middle of the road might best be left to the Lost and Found. One coat all by itself. One palm branch might be equivalent to a tumbleweed blowing by. But you see, to really signal to the people of Jerusalem that someone important was coming, the crowd gathered together. It is in our gathering together that we realize our full potential as Christians, that we realize that full potential. It is in our gathering together that we realize God in our midst and calling us to claim our faith.

We claim our faith every time we gather around this table and hear those familiar words and take of the familiar elements, remembering Jesus' loving example. It is through Communion we claim our faith, in all its history it links us from the first Christians to now. It is through Communion that we claim our faith in all our present complexities. It is through Communion we claim our faith in all its potential for the future, a future that lies with the young faithful learning the old faith, and with us old faithful learning new faith. Together we seek, and together we find. Together we claim our faith, that all might draw near and know our God. Amen.