

Mark 11:1-11  
Palm Sunday

Before I read today's text, I want to set it in its place in the Gospel of Mark. At the beginning of the Gospel, we were introduced to Jesus first by John the Baptist who said that one more powerful would come after him and then we heard a voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism say, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus gathered his first disciples and began his ministry in Galilee. Through parables and encounters with all kinds of people, Jesus taught about what the kin-dom of God is like and what it meant to follow him on the Way. Throughout the Gospel, we have read that, in spite of all they had seen and heard, his disciples remained relatively clueless. In chapter 8, though, Peter seemed to finally get it as he answered Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" He replied, "You are the Messiah," but it was clear even then that, while the disciples were learning, they still didn't completely understand. Jesus predicted his own suffering and death, but they couldn't or wouldn't hear it. We talked a little bit about their inability to "see" last week when we read the story of Bartimaeus.

Up until that point, Jesus encouraged his followers to keep his ministry on the down-low because he knew that a spotlight on what he was saying about God's kin-dom would not sit well with the representatives of Caesar's kingdom. The religious leaders had already quizzed him, hoping he would say something to get himself in real trouble, or at the very least, alienate himself from his followers. All the while, Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem, with many other Jewish people, for Passover. And with his loud, raucous entry into the city, Jesus was no longer on the down-low.

Here is 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. (NRSV)

I wonder what it would have been like to be there that day. What did it smell like? Was it hot? Windy? Was it so loud women were covering the ears of their babies? What do you see? I would like to invite the artists, of all ages, among us, to imagine sitting where Jesus sat, riding into town on a donkey. Draw a picture of what you think he saw. What did the crowd look like? What was on the road in front of him? And please share your creations with us on Facebook after worship!

In this story, as Jesus entered Jerusalem, the welcome he received tells us his followers had kind of fallen in love with him in sort of a pop icon way. The picture that comes to my mind is of some of the first campaign rallies for Bernie Sanders that were covered by the news during the 2016 election cycle. I remember watching, fascinated, as he spoke to college students all over the country. He was an old, white politician who, until then, wasn't even on their radar, but they liked what they heard, even as they were still learning who he was and what he stood for. The college students in my life at the time were pretty sure they loved him. They were definitely feeling the Bern.

Or maybe this imagery works better for you, think about what it's like to fall in love with someone. The way I've experienced it is that the object of our love is the epitome of whatever trait we believe is the most noble in another human. For example, if a sense of humor is the most important trait in a mate, our true love is naturally the funniest person we have ever met. If intelligence is what we value, our partner is the smartest person on the planet. Lutheran minister and author, Walter Wangerin, wrote a book about marriage a long time ago. In it, he wrote,

“Love lies a little. Love...feels so good when it is satisfied, that it never wants to stop. Therefore, love edits the facts in order to continue to feel good.”

There was a lot of feeling good that day as the crowd admired Jesus. There is an important point to be made with regard to the difference between what it means to be an admirer versus what it means to be a follower. Theologian Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “A follower is or strives to be what he admires. An admirer, however, keeps himself personally detached. He fails to see that what is admired involves a claim upon him, and thus he fails to be or strive to be what he admires.”

The crowd standing along the road that day admired Jesus, but would they really follow him, would they strive to be like him? They thought they were welcoming a king like King David, with big warhorses, armor and weapons to defeat the enemy who, in this case was the Roman Empire. They loved their ideal of Jesus, but their ideal wasn't reality. The reality was their king was riding in on a humble donkey, not a regal warhorse. He wasn't even armed. He was not there celebrating his latest military victory. He was there, in fact, to proclaim God's empire which was nothing like Caesar's empire that relied on oppression and violence in order to keep the “peace.”

We can't blame the crowd. They were fed up with the way things were. They were tired of being extorted by the Romans. The Empire had done nothing good for them. They had heard Jesus talking about a world very different from what they were experiencing, a world of equity and justice, a world in which there was enough for everyone, where there was true peace, and some people were not worth more than others. And as he entered Jerusalem that day, they expected he was going to make that world come to be, by whatever means necessary. In the weeks to come, we are going to talk about what happens next, about Jesus' last week in Jerusalem and how things went from this scene in Mark's story of an admiring, enthusiastic crowd to another very different scene with a different crowd shouting, “Crucify him!” Would these Palm Sunday admirers follow him to the cross? Would we?

If Jesus was coming to town today, who do you imagine would be standing along Highway 75 yelling, “Hosanna?” You see, we like to imagine we would be there. But the truth is, right now, the systems work for a lot of us. Our economic,

criminal justice, education, healthcare, and political systems don't work for many of our neighbors though. Covid-19 has illuminated that. In the midst of all of this upheaval, there are some of us whose lives haven't really changed that much, other than we have to stay home most of the time. Keeping that in mind, would you be giving a hero's welcome to the one who was coming to turn it all upside-down? Would you follow him?

Before we imagine ourselves waving palm branches and shouting, "Hosanna," we need to decide, do we really want to be saved? Do we really want to be saved from a system that has, frankly, made us pretty comfortable? Are we really fans of equity? Are we interested in a criminal justice system that takes the war on drugs to white collar bankers instead of young Black men? Are we interested in a healthcare system where the Phillips 66 employee gets the exact same care as the uninsured Walmart employee? Are we interested in an education system where the children who live in affluent neighborhoods are educated in comparable facilities, with the exact same resources, as the children who live in low-income housing? Are we really? Because that is the message Jesus came to proclaim. Not one of us is worth more or less to God.

That's good news...or bad news, depending on who you are. Right now, this message is especially important because there are a lot of people more vulnerable now than they were a month ago. The systems that have worked for us may not be working so well any more. And it is likely, as the weeks go by, there will be even more. Now is the time for us to commit to trying to see the world through the eyes of people who don't have the privilege of being able to collect a paycheck from home, who don't have access to the internet so they are isolated and have no idea where to turn for help. Friends, following the ways of Jesus is dangerous. It means risking our own comfort and security for the good of the whole. It means standing in a metaphorical crowd yelling, "Hosanna," knowing we have benefited from the very systems our neighbors need to be saved from. And the truth is, we need to be saved from them too.

We need to be saved from a system where states compete for vital healthcare supplies in the midst of a pandemic. We need to be saved from the constant pressure to produce more, be more, be better. We need to be saved from eating more than we need, drinking more than we should, and clinging tightly to what is ours. We need to be saved from all the ways we have been taught to take care of

ourselves first and let others just pull themselves up by their bootstraps, which for the record, don't exist.

Here's the deal, when we keep our hands closed tightly around what is ours, they are not open to receive. And right now, more than ever, we need to receive... We need to receive the unconditional love God has for each one of us and when we do, we should turn right around and give it away. This is how we will be more than admirers, we will be followers, followers of the one who rode into Jerusalem that day to proclaim the kin-dom of God and turn the world upside-down. Well, our world is officially upside-down, so let's get busy proclaiming that the ways of God are our ways and that there is a place in this crazy upside-down world for everyone to belong and be loved. And there is no better place to start than around the communion table that extends to wherever you are this morning. We all belong at this table, we belong to each other, we belong to God.