

“Cheers of Expectation”

March 24, 2024

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Mark 11: 1-11

Through this time of Lent as we approach Easter, we have been journeying with Jesus toward the cross. Thank you for being willing to do something a little different this morning as we took a little of the journey with Him, marching in together.

Us preachers often try and set the stage for Palm Sunday by comparing it to a victory parade. Sometimes we try to go modern, like when the Chiefs won the Super Bowl and paraded down the streets of Kansas City. Sometimes we go ancient, like when a general and his army would march home after a great battle, showing off the spoils of their victory including the enemy's king in chains. Either way, the people would line the streets and cheer the victors. Those images work well to get the feeling and energy of the day, but there is a significant difference. Jesus hadn't won anything yet. The sports teams and generals were greeted with cheers for what they had accomplished. They won. They were victorious. They were champions. Jesus hadn't won anything yet. The cheers that went up for Jesus were cheers of hope. They were cheers of expectation. They were cheers that their longed-for new day might be at hand. They saw something in Jesus they liked. They saw someone with power, who used His power to help others as opposed to helping Himself. They saw someone who was about lifting others up, not controlling them. They saw someone who inspires by example as opposed to one who says, "Staying home is the safest thing to do" then takes his family to the beach because you stayed home. They had heard the stories about Jesus: about how He teaches people to look beyond themselves, how He feeds those who are hungry without raising taxes, how He gives them hope. They had seen some of the people Jesus has helped. People who were hurting and broken, but have since come back as full, contributing members of society. The people everyone ignores or erases, Jesus restored. In Jesus, they found someone who genuinely cares, who loves others more than He loves Himself. They had never seen this before, and they liked it. They wanted it. They wanted more of it. They shouted "Hosanna!", waved leafy branches in the air then laid them down on the ground like a red carpet before Him. They lined the streets just to see Him. This is the kind of leader we want. This is who we want to follow. They cheered for Him: cheers of encouragement, cheers of hope, cheers of expectation, cheers of longing for a new day. But new days don't come without change, and change is hard.

The last verse of our reading says, "Then Jesus 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." It doesn't say what Jesus saw when He visited the temple, but we get a hint because the next day He came back with some attitude. We call it "the cleansing of the temple". The temple was controlled by the Pharisees and Sadducees and had become a place

where the self-righteous gathered to point fingers at the sinners, creating outcasts and second-class citizens in the process. The leaders used the sacred laws and symbol of the temple to create followers in their own image, restricting access to God to only those who played their game. Jesus screamed, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.”

What would Jesus see if He did that today – if He came to the temple or church and looked around? Would He see the temple/church filled with modern Pharisees and Sadducees? Modern Pharisees who lift up prayers, thanking God that they are not like other people – the poor, the homosexual, the sick, the divorced, the addicted, the lost, the Hispanic. Modern Sadducees who try to control the worship and the people to create followers in their own image. Or would Jesus find the place filled with the outcasts, the sick, the hurting, the lost; all looking to be justified and affirmed where they are – told they are okay and don’t need to change at all. Or would He find the self-righteous and the broken, the controllers and the out of control, the “back to Egypt committee” and the “what is next consortium”, all trying to work out their salvation together?

Of course when I say, “working out their salvation”, I do not mean they are trying to earn their way to heaven or even make their own way. No, what I mean is working out what their salvation means and what it looks like to live it in this life. It is hard task. A really hard task which keeps changing and flexing. Part of what makes it so hard is Jesus’ call to individuals and His call to the church are very different. Let me repeat that. Jesus’ call to individuals and His call to the church are very different. As individuals, we are called to a higher standard than the rest of the world. In Paul’s teachings, we are called to deny the selfish part of our being – the part that wants to be served, the part that wants life to revolve around our own personal pleasure, the part that says, what is right is defined by what feels good, the part that says “I need to look out for number 1”. As individuals we are not to listen to that voice, but listen to the voice of Jesus. The voice that says don’t love yourself first. Love God first, with all you heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. The voice that says the greatest among us is the servant of all. To listen to the voice that says in your personal life, turn away from evil. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 says, “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, prostitutes... thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.” Galatians 5 adds “sorcery... jealousy, anger, quarreling... and envy” to the list of “those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” There is even 2 Thessalonians 3:10, “anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” The individual Christian is called to a higher standard than the rest of the world – in morality, in right living, in generosity, and in purity.

Yet as the church, Jesus calls us to radical acceptance, always reaching out in love to the outcast, the poor, the hurting, the one who makes bad choices. Jesus reached out to tax

collectors – the biggest traitors of the day. He reached out to prostitutes and those with diseases everyone knew were caused by sinful living. He was constantly in the face of the Pharisees who were trying to keep the faith pure by keeping the poor and the hurting out. Matthew 25 says the church is to see Jesus in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned; even when there is good reasons why they are hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned. The very reason God came to earth in Jesus was to meet us where we are and bring us home. Not waiting until we got it all together, but while we were yet sinners, coming to us, meeting us where we are, and giving up His life to bring us home. The church is the continuing body of Jesus on earth.

Can you see how different those two pictures are. As individuals we need to protect ourselves from sin. As church we welcome and invite sinners. As individuals we deny the very selfless behavior we reach out to as a church. It is tempting to just pick one side or the other. Many of what we call our most conservative congregations focus on the side of the individual – shunning and protecting us from sin – and they get accused of being judgmental, hateful, out of touch Pharisees. Many of what we call our most liberal congregations focus on the church's call – inviting and accepting everyone just as they are – and they get accused of baptizing evil, pretending everything is okay and pretending they know more than the Bible. The reality is we are called to both of these. And what makes it work is God's Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is what empowers God's people to deny their sinful ways and live a life acceptable and pleasing to God. The presence of the Holy Spirit is what breaks sin's hold on us. Without it, we don't have a chance. Therefore we don't expect righteousness from those who are not yet a part of God's church, not yet baptized into the Holy Spirit. So invite them into the power. And expect change once God's Holy Spirit enters them. And if the expected change doesn't come about, maybe it was our expectation, not God's.

That is what the people were cheering for on Palm Sunday. That is what they lined the streets to see. That is why they lifted their voices in encouragement. They saw one who would meet them where they are, accept them and love them; but love them too much to let them stay there, giving them the power to be more. They saw hope for a new way, and they couldn't just stay home, they had to be a part of it. And the funny thing is, even their expectations ended up being too small.

Mike Van Heyningen