

Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
Palm Sunday
April 13, 2014

BETWEEN THE CALM AND THE CHAOS

This Passion narrative, as it is called, appears in all four gospels in the Christian New Testament. Each one has various nuances and emphasis. What is noticeably missing from the Matthew version today has always been most striking to me. That is the particular image that the gospel of Luke offers and I quote: “The women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance, watching these things.” These are the same women who had witnessed the indelible events of the passion, who are mentioned as being at the cross, and who return to anoint the body of Christ. Presumably, they are the same women who have cared for Jesus throughout his life and have assimilated an inordinate amount of joy, exhilaration, pain and agony that is palpable. What do we suppose they were thinking? The journey from Galilee we can imagine has been wrought with both calm and chaos. We hear that calm and chaos reflected in Matthew’s version as well. There are many moods along the way.

Today is like that. A Sunday with essentially two titles: Palm Sunday and the Sunday of the Passion. The frenzy of the palms and the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It embodies and captures a variety of moods. And it can feel even chaotic if we imagine ourselves in the crowd along the streets, yelling loudly, waving frantically as Jesus rode on a donkey into Jerusalem. The women who had followed him were there too. What could they have been thinking? The only one we might imagine

had any calm in the midst of chaos was the donkey. Perhaps the donkey was the only one who really may have known where he was going.

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This is the first mood of Palm Sunday. The second mood is reflected in the traditional reading of the Passion narrative we heard from the gospel of Matthew. This is the solemn side of the day when we are forced to confront the dark side of human experience and obtain a close encounter with a biblical mob transitioning from “hosanna hosanna” to “let him be crucified!”

These are the two moods; the two sentiments that seem to be at odds with the laws of physics that say two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Our particular challenge is an emotional law of physics, which says the same thing. Consequently, we may be tempted to resolve this challenge as many of us did at other times and places in our lives and remove the Passion from the Palms – make that leapfrog from Palm Sunday to Easter and leave the suffering piece out.

It is no exaggeration for me to say, nevertheless, that a large portion of my own Protestant Christian experience as an adolescent and young adult fell along the lines as some have called the “let’s have a parade” theory of Palm Sunday. In other words, it took on a form that could not bear the indignity, the violence, suffering or embarrassment of the cross. The palms therefore

became a symbol of Roman victory, and to bear them illustrated a triumph of sorts.

However, to bear the palms you were given as you entered Memorial Church today is meant to remind us not of triumph or moral merit badges. They are not meant to remind us of some highly developed force of dramatic tragedy. They are not signs of triumph or of tragedy. They are signs of suffering – the suffering of one called the Messiah, of his people, the suffering of all creation and us along with it.

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Earlier this week, while I was thinking about this sermon for today, I came across a timely OP-ED piece by NY Times columnist David Brooks entitled *What Suffering Does*. He opened the column by remarking that he had found himself in many conversations lately in which the unspoken assumption was that the main goal of life is to maximize happiness, which is normal. “When we plan for the future, we often talk about all the good times and good experiences we hope to have. Our culture is awash in talk about happiness.” Brooks noted that in one 3-month period last year, more than 1,000 books were released on Amazon on the subject of happiness. He continued to illustrate another phenomenon. He writes: “When people remember the past, they don’t only talk about happiness. It is often the ordeals that seem most significant. People shoot for happiness but feel

formed by suffering.” Certainly, as Brooks and others illustrate and with whom I agree, there is nothing intrinsically ennobling about suffering. Suffering is sometimes just destructive and to be exited quickly. But, suggests Brooks, some people are ennobled by it and it drags you deeper into yourself. Theologian Paul Tillich wrote that people who

endure suffering are taken beneath the routines of life and find they are not who they believed themselves to be. It gives them a more accurate sense of their own limitations, what they can control and cannot control. When people are forced into these deeper zones they are forced to confront the fact they cannot determine what goes on there. Even when tranquility begins to come back, or when grief eases, it is always not clear where the relief comes from. The healing process too feels as though it’s part of some natural or divine process beyond individual control. David Brooks suggests that it is at this point in the midst of difficulty that people begin to feel a call. They are not

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masters of the situation, but neither are they helpless. They can't determine the course of their pain, but they can participate in responding to it. He describes the right response to this sort of pain as holiness, not in the purely religious sense, but rather seeing life as a moral drama, placing the hard experiences in a moral context and attempting to redeem something bad by turning it into something sacred. Brooks cites examples of parents who lose a child and start foundations. Prisoners in concentration camps with psychologist Viktor Frankl rededicating themselves to living up to hopes and expectations of their loved ones, even though those loved ones might already be dead. What all of this has illustrated for me is that we can and never will be able to avoid the inevitable suffering that happens either for ourselves or

others and that recovering from it is not like recovering from a disease. Writes Brooks: "We may not come out healed, but undoubtedly we will come out different and categorically changed. Life is indeed filled with dilemmas, with moods of every kind, along the spectrum of happiness to suffering and everything in between."

Needless to say, on this and every Palm Sunday in the years to come, we are inevitably faced with resolving a dilemma of two moods, and tempted to bifurcate the victory side to our heads, and the Passion, the suffering side, to our hearts. But we know that emotional segregation is neither possible nor desirable. I have to wonder if the women and presumably many others who had followed Jesus from Galilee that stood at a distance watching "all of these things" encountered the same struggle, the same dilemma.

Perhaps, from a distance, what they watched and witnessed, and what we from even a further distance do today - is the one thing that gives us the ability to take the ambiguity, even the confusion, the conflict of emotion in this monumental moment in Christian history - and see in the whole of it the only reconciliation possible. That is -

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manifest love – in its adjective form, *manifest* meaning evident, palpable, distinct, unmistakable – a manifest love

of God as revealed in Christ, the primary subject of this Passion narrative today. The only thing that may stand between rank and utter chaos, doubt and insanity and an attempt to stand whole in the middle of ambiguity, suffering and conflict is the manifest love of God. Wherever you find yourself located on the broad, broad spectrum in Christianity of how you

think or what you believe about the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus – the one reality may be that an understanding of God's, a divine, mysterious manifest love is the only thing that makes sense out of suffering, conflict, and tragedy. And to be sure, that this manifest love does not do away with suffering, or conflict, or tragedy. However we wrestle with this particular piece of Christian history should help us come to terms with that.

God's manifest love may precisely be the thing that makes it possible to bear it, to share in it, to pass through, to understand it. Therein may lay the one kernel of truth, the essence of the Passion. We in our sophistication and impulse may want to interfere with that and make it come out right or even suggest there is simply no unresolved ambiguity in this Passion story.

We know however, that this is not the case. The conflicts of mood, the vacillation of will, the confusion of sentiments, the crowd that yells hosanna one minute and let him be crucified the next is the same crowd. The Messiah who says "let this cup pass from me" also says, "not my will but thine be done" is the same Messiah. Steadfast, faithful disciples who become deserters and deniers are the same disciples. The cynical criminal on the cross near Jesus asked what we all might want to ask: If you're so good, why are you up here?

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Ambiguity is indeed evident, palpable, distinct and unmistakable in the Passion. That will never change.

Where does that leave us, but perhaps at the mercy of the ridicule of skeptics and intellectuals? Where should I hide my palm when I leave the building and walk across the quad or elsewhere for fear that people look at me strangely? And finally, what to make of this unmistakable reality at the center of this narrative called suffering?

A number of years ago I recalled the Memorial Church Choir singing a piece called “We Speak of Love.” Attributed to Jane Stanford and selected from two texts from inscriptions inside this church it says:

We speak of love, but what do we know about it, unless we see the power of love manifested; what do we know unless we are given the power to bestow.

There is something in all our hearts, which can be reached; there is something, some chord, which can be reached, that will give forth sweet music if we only have the skill to touch it.

The kernel of truth of *manifest love* has two sides. *Manifest* in its verb form is to express, display, and reveal, to demonstrate. The Passion is not only to read, to imagine, or to hear of suffering, but to share in it. Manifest love and weep at the brokenness of what is meant to be whole. Manifest love and enter into the sadness of others as if it is ours, because it is. Manifest love and live fully and hopefully, even in the ambiguous reality of here and now.

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Manifest love and do not keep your distance. Manifest love because love must have a face. Manifest love because we are loved and now are free to do the same. Again and again. Amen.