

“Wondrous Love”

Palm Sunday, April 2, 2023

Scripture: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:3-11

Three readings this morning, which is a little unusual. But each of them has something a little different to tell us about Jesus and his ministry, what it means and where it's headed. Take this passage from Isaiah, for instance. It describes the treatment of someone whose only concern is to bring hope to those who are weary, comfort to those who are neglected or marginalized. The writer of this poem, one of four in Isaiah known as “servant songs,” doesn't identify who the servant is. It's not clear if they're referring to the writer or some one yet to appear or even to the people as a whole. But we can understand why the early Christians would read this passage and identify it with Jesus.

The servant in the poem is persecuted for giving people living on the margin a sense of hope. It's what can be expected in any society when someone rejects the accepted divisions. It's how the early Christians understood Jesus' ministry. He dispensed compassion and healing without regard for social rank, ethnicity or gender. He challenged those in power to see the last and the least among the people with new eyes. But that was perceived as a threat to the social order. Jesus was arrested and executed as a subversive.

That may be why his entry into Jerusalem is such a pivotal event; unlike most stories about Jesus, this is one of the few told in all four gospels. By entering the way he does, Jesus displays a command of prophecy. He takes control of the moment to step into a role, as Matthew understands it, which equates him with David, the ultimate ruler of Israel. But not as a conquering hero. Jesus enters in humility, identifying with the crowds of people who throw their cloaks in his path. Jesus becomes one with the poor and they recognize themselves in his love for them.

That recognition makes it possible for them to, as Paul says, “put on Christ.” There is an exchange happening in this moment between Jesus and the people, the same exchange we are invited to enter. As one 8th century mystic, Andrew of Crete, puts it, “It is ourselves that we must spread under Christ's feet.” Not to be trampled by him but to join him on the path that leads to the cross. We enter his humility, “regarding others as better than ourselves.”

Jesus' entrance to Jerusalem is the beginning of his passion. It starts here, several days before his arrest and trial. It starts with elation and excitement and anticipation. To become part of this movement lifts us from despair; it offers joy and hope. Jesus' entry to Jerusalem is a way to resist the temptation of wealth and empire. It exposes the powers of the world as false because those powers rely on keeping the weak in a state of submission; they rely on maintaining divisions between rich and poor, men and women, Black and white. All the segregation that exists in our society is a rejection of everything Jesus stands for, everything he calls us to

embrace. Until we understand that, until we realize being one with Christ means being one with all whom Christ loves, we'll never enter Jerusalem or share in his passion.

In the 1980's Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who was assassinated for his advocacy on behalf of the poor, once wrote, "For the church, the many abuses of human life, liberty and dignity are a heartfelt suffering. The church, entrusted with the earth's glory, believes that in each person is the Creator's image and that everyone who tramples it offends God. As the holy defender of God's rights and of God's images, the church must cry out. It takes as spittle in its face, as lashes on its back, as the cross in its passion, all that human beings suffer, even though they be unbelievers. They suffer as God's images. There is no dichotomy between humans and God's image. Whoever tortures a human being, whoever abuses a human being, whoever outrages a human being abuses God's image, and the church takes as its own that cross, that martyrdom." Those are powerful words spoken into a maelstrom of corruption and oppression that existed in El Salvador in those years. But they are every bit as valid today as they were then. We are still struggling to be the church for the sake of the marginalized and the rejected and the abused.

I'm convinced that's what Paul means in his letter to the Philippians when he tells them to consider others as better than themselves. They are invited into a relationship together that's modeled on a particular image of Christ, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself." The word in Greek is *kenosis*, "self-empty." Why would Jesus do that? Why willingly give up power? The only explanation that makes sense is love. As one commentator, writing about Philippians, puts it, "The purpose of the gospel through Jesus Christ is the manifestation of love...Love is, on the one hand, discerning and demonstrating the deepest good for others...Love is also recognizing the power and presence of God and Christ in others." When we empty ourselves of power Christ's love can be revealed through us in the world.

And through that love we discover our connection to others. Yesterday a few of us from here and the Clarence and Amherst churches heard from Rabbi Jonathan Freirich on behalf of VOICE Buffalo. VOICE Buffalo is committed to the principle there is no liberation without Black liberation and invites folks from other communities to join them in achieving that goal. What Jonathan emphasized with us is the need to recognize that no matter what our background or ethnicity, no matter how different we might be from one another we are all connected. Creating better access for the Black community to economic stability through home ownership or to healthcare or to education benefits all of us. Those of us living here in the Northtowns have a vested interest in promoting progress and wealth for folks on Buffalo's East Side. We don't live in isolation from one another, even though it often feels that way or we convince ourselves of it. If we make the challenges facing those areas of the community our challenges, we can create a more stable and equitable society, a society that works for everyone.

But it doesn't happen without emptying ourselves of the power we think we have. It doesn't happen until we make it our business to live for the sake of others, in humility regarding

others as better than ourselves. That requires a wondrous love demonstrated in the example of Christ who enters the center of power in complete humility. We're called to follow him, to make his love our own, to be the presence of Christ in the world sustaining the weary, obedient to God's call no matter what the cost.

Amen