Palm Sunday

This morning is a high Sunday in the Lord. Your pastor has returned from sabbatical. House of Hope has completed another year of the Calvin W. Didier Annual Seminar on Religion and Contemporary Thought. It was a blessing to be present and attentive in the second and third presentation of Princeton University Professor Dr. Eddie Glaude on “How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul.” And now, I am enjoying the privilege to be in worship, filled with the joy of the Lord. The liturgy and powerful singing of this choir creates a tone for the symbolic power of this Palm Sunday observance. We are observing a high day on the Christian calendar celebrating Jesus’ riding into Jerusalem on a donkey to fulfill the prophetic scriptures found in Zachariah 9:9, which reads, “Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion, shout for joy, O daughter [of] Jerusalem! See, your King shall come to you; a just savior is he. Meek and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass” (NAB).

Clearly, the New Testament writer Matthew is demonstrating Jesus’ attempt to link the Old Testament prophecy to this narrative. He quotes the prophetic words in Matthew 21:5 and calls direct attention to Jesus’ desire to link the prophecy to his entrance into Jerusalem. Thus, Matthew utilizes again his gospel as a teaching tool for new Christians who would later read his gospel accounts. When you read Matthew, look at the gospel through the eyes of a new learner of the gospel’s intent to both affirm and connect the prophesy of the Old Testament History with the life of the New Testament Jesus. It is heavily didactic in nature. Matthew writes to teach newcomers to the faith about the history, culture, and character of the traditions of Judaism during his time. One might view this gospel as a good training tool for a new members’ class in the New Testament Church.

The disciples of Jesus find the donkey and bring it to Jesus. They placed their cloaks on the donkey and Jesus mounted it to ride into Jerusalem. The gathered crowd placed their cloaks on the ground while others who cut palm branches placed them on the road as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. I am convinced that there is no accident that the gospel writer, Matthew, placed this text strategically after the miracle of Jesus’ healing of two blind men. This placement accentuates his healing abilities through the miracle working power of the Divine. However, his placement of the cleansing of the temple immediately after this Jerusalem entry is a call to reform both the current day practices of the temple and its priestly leadership. On one hand, Jesus is offering hope in Matthews’ gospel for breaking barriers between the alienated, while on the other hand declaring that reform in the temple is needed to faithfully witness to the contextual realities of their time. In other words, Jesus is their Calvin W. Didier Annual Seminar on Religion and Contemporary Thought presenter in this moment. He does it not through words, but as an example of a life lived in wholeness through the Almighty. Amid these great moments, Jesus is celebrated to fulfill the promise of the Old Testament. He uses the opportunity to make a statement that both indicates the primary religious institution of his day while demonstrating the power to heal God’s people through giving sight to blind men.

So, in between these two events (healing and creating an environment for temple reform and transformation), Jesus is being given a ticker-tape parade. Palm Sunday is the observance of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey while both participants and onlookers celebrated his ministry shouting “Hosanna, Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Jesus is proclaiming the very act of faith through healing that is the calling of his ministry and ours. After the ticker-tape parade of palms, cleansing the temple as an act of indictment against practices that promote
the temple while ignoring the power of God Almighty to heal broken people was his message. It is interesting to note that his first sermon in the temple found in Luke 4 when he declared, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor ...” (Lk. 4:18), and the current passage mentioned regarding reform in the temple are the most compelling text that indicates his willingness to call people to serving a more depth-filled life in the Lord. The tragedy in both instances is that the people rebelled and sought to kill him.

This is the same dilemma we are facing in modern day Christianity. We become so insular in our desires to witness to the Church that the Kingdom of God message of Jesus is lost. In other words, our balanced budgets; neat packaging of church programs; orderly engagement, and sanitized view of ourselves and the Church has become the impediment of our faith. As the Reverend Floretta Watkins, pastor of Seigle Avenue Presbyterian Church told us during a recent joint gathering of the Presbyterian Mission Agency and the Office of the General Assembly, “Ministry is messy!” Ministry is messy! She declared that we are prone to attempts to sanitize our faith and, therefore, remain impotent to transform our communities or world, because of failure to recognize that the ministry of Jesus calls us to the “messiness” of the world.

In 1998, I was called to a ministry in Memphis, Tennessee, to become the fourth organizing pastor of a new church development in four years. Simply, the church failed three times with three different leaders in three years. This congregation had a unique mission in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Our mission statement and presbytery mission called for the church to evangelize the poor into membership in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). What an oxymoron! The ministry was messy, because the lives of God’s people who we sought to evangelize and engage was messy. I engaged people whose lives were more convoluted than mine, but could not help but recognize my own imperfections through the lens of engagement and observations. I must admit that the ministry was difficult, but the words of Henri Nouwen continued to speak to me. I was a “Wounded Healer”—binding up my wounds while trying with God’s help to heal others. This is who we must be in the twenty-first century as a church. The world is messy. Whereas, I enjoyed hearing the perspectives of Dr. Eddie Glaude yesterday, our faith reminds us that we cannot intellectualize the pain of the suffering or critique suffering without being a witness to the power of engaging in God’s healing.

It is messy when the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) stands for refugees who have come to the United States of America fleeing their own countries under the threat of death or providing a cover from scourge of the browning of the United States. Or, when our denomination calls for common-sense gun laws to stop the 30,000 plus deaths a year by guns within our country. It is messy when the church shows us in some places advocating for increased educational standards in all schools, both public and private, and in all communities both marginalized and privileged. It gets messy when the church declares that we don’t build walls. No, we tear down walls of hostility and alienation for the sake of Jesus in the world. Jon Lewis reminded a group of us at Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina that the problem with the church is that we are not in trouble. He said the church is at its best when it is in trouble. I contend that we must learn to live between the “celebration of Jesus’ ticker-tape parade” and the “shattered expectations caused by human sinfulness.”

While we celebrate a high Palm Sunday with palms and pageantry, it was daunting to wake up to the news that two Coptic Churches in Cairo, Egypt, were bombed during a Palm Sunday worship. Approximately forty-seven worshippers were killed. This tragedy is representative of the vast dichotomy of standing between Palm Sunday celebration and the cross that represents our faith. We who know Christ Jesus bear both the burden and the blessing of living though the dichotomous faith experience. And, I am convinced that the greatest impotence to living the gospel is that we are thankful for the high moments, but fearful of living fully in the in-between times of the gospel, because the in-between times can be messy. Ticker-tape parades can be followed by shattered expectations.
The power of Jesus is witnessed in this text through his connecting the Old Testament prophecy of Zachariah that claimed his role as a suffering servant amid the messiness of his work and witness. Jesus’ healing of the two blind men prior to the parade, the ticker-tape parade of palms coming through the prophesy of Zachariah, the shouting of the crowds in the ticker-tape parade prepared by the people, are all a sequential path to the cross. The cross of shattered expectations of longevity was on the way. The cross of death through the authorities Jesus sought to redeem. The cross that was necessary for us to know that Christianity as we know it is not some lullaby for the soul, but instead is a route to claiming redemptive love of Jesus in the face of falling governments and the pain of God’s people caused and created by people in high places.

Done Made My Vow

Refrain:
Done made my vow to the Lord,
And I never will turn back,
Oh I will go, I shall go
to see what the end will be.

1 Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down;
See what the end will be,
But still my soul is heav’nly bound,
See what the end will be. (refrain)

2 When I was a mourner just like you;
See what the end will be,
I prayed and prayed ’til I came through,
See what the end will be.

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