

I have a message for you today. This is it: (Sign language for "Jesus is the Messiah"*) Did you understand it? Let me "tell" you again more slowly (repeat and add verbal words). Our daughter, Sharon, learned American Sign Language to use during her graduate internship at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. Gallaudet is the only university in the US established for the deaf.

I'm fascinated with the use of nonverbal signs to communicate a message as effectively as verbal words. In fact, sometimes the nonverbal can be even more effective. You may not have thought of the two Palm Sunday scriptures we've read today in that light, but that is exactly what's happening.

Throughout this Lenten season we have been looking at the words and prayers of Jesus and of those around Him during what we call "The Passion" or "Holy Week," the events during the time between Palm Sunday and Easter. They have been words of both passion and compassion. Today we come to two different examples of passion, expressed both verbally and nonverbally.

Our first scripture from Matthew retells the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus rode humbly into Jerusalem on a donkey colt, the ancient symbol of kingship and authority. This nonverbal declaration of Jesus being the Messiah was understood by the Jews. They welcomed him waving palm branches with shouts of prayerful and passionate praise, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

This crowd may have seen Jesus heal, teach, and more, but they didn't really understand him. Palm branches were a political sign in that time. The nonverbal expectation was clear: Jesus will overthrow Roman authority and set up God's kingdom for the Jews, then -- "Happy days are here again!"

As the week progressed and Jesus showed little sign of being a political hero, some who had shouted prayers of praise and devotion were later heard shouting "Give us Barabbas!" "Crucify him!" Their nonverbal response was to turn away from him. They weren't committed to Jesus. They were loyal only as long as their expectations were fulfilled and they got what they wanted from him.

"Give us Barabbas." It's not a request made to God, but to Pilate. They are words of passion again, but this time the passion of hate, frustration, even rage. It's a request shouted at Pilate by a crowd of people for whom Jesus would later pray, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

So, who was Barabbas? A movie was made about him several years ago, but it was based on conjecture of the Hollywood scriptwriters. All we know is the brief character information given in each of the gospels.

In Matthew, he was simply "a notorious prisoner."

In Mark, he was "one of the rebels in prison who had committed murder in the insurrection."

In Luke, he was "a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection, and for murder."

Our second scripture today from John reads, "Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion."

In short, to Rome he was a criminal worthy of crucifixion. To his friends he was probably a patriot, a zealot, working to restore the Kingdom of David and end Roman rule. The irony is Barabbas was guilty of the very crimes of insurrection Jesus was unjustly accused of.

Now enter Pilate, the weak governor of the province, puppet of Rome, and pawn of the Jewish leaders. In a gesture of Roman magnanimity to appease the Jews, each year the governor offered pardon to a prisoner at Passover time. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent of insurrection, but he was blackmailed by the Jewish leaders to sentence Jesus to death or they would make an official report to Rome about some of Pilate’s actions in the province. Pilate knew he could be dismissed if that happened.

Pilate tried to evade the responsibility of dealing with Jesus justly by engineering Jesus’ release indirectly by offering His ceremonial release. Surely the crowd of Jews would choose this man, who was hailed as King of the Jews just days before, instead of a known criminal. So, in this emotional scene, the people were given the choice: the Insurrection man or the Resurrection man. Their words and actions revealed their true character.

So who was this crowd of fickle allegiance?

Some were the same people who shouted hosannas as Jesus entered Jerusalem.

Some were probably Barabbas’ compatriots who championed his release.

Some were planted by the Jewish leaders to direct the crowd to shout for Barabbas instead of Jesus.

But some were undoubtedly common Jewish folk who got caught up in the moment. They waved their palms and shouted hosanna when Jesus entered Jerusalem, just like everyone else. Later they got caught up in the verbal violence, just like everyone else. It’s like being caught up in riots or demonstrations today. People don’t think clearly in those situations. There are often regrets afterward.

One thing is sure, each one in the crowd made a choice. Their verbal words also clearly spoke nonverbally about themselves and their priorities.

When the crowd chose Barabbas, they chose lawlessness over law.

When the crowd chose Barabbas, they chose hatred over love.

When the crowd chose Barabbas, they chose the values of this world over the values of God represented in Christ.

Our choices also clearly tell things about ourselves. We forget that, after we make our choices, they turn around and make us, for good or bad. The truth is, we can “choose our choices” but we can’t always choose the consequences of our choices. As the postscript for today says, “Some troubles come from wanting our own way, others come from getting it.”

Frank Outlaw wrote this reminder for us about our choices:

Watch your thoughts; they become your words.

Watch your words; they become your actions.

Watch your actions; they become your habits.

Watch your habits; they become your character.

Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.

And what is clear in all communication is that "actions speak louder than words,"-- and people are watching.

A young man was being interviewed for a position in a small business firm. He had a neat appearance and had prepared an excellent resume in which he listed his pastor, his Sunday school teacher, and a church deacon as references. The owner of the business studied the resume then said, "I appreciate these recommendations from your church friends. But what I would really like is to hear from someone who knows you on weekdays."

Richard DeHaan writes, "Sorry to say, there is a sharp contrast between the way some Christians act in church and how they behave out of church. The principles and intentions they profess on Sunday are not practiced every day. I guess we could say, 'A hypocrite is a person who is not himself on Sunday!'"

Friends, Monday through Saturday is when "the rubber meets the road" for our faith. Have we ever said words of praise and devotion for God on Sunday and then as soon as God doesn't meet our expectations turn away from him later? The truth is, at one time or another we've ALL made poor choices and acted as hypocrites because we're human and we're still growing in the faith. And that's the rest of what this story today teaches us.

You notice we're observing Palm/Passion Sunday today. Why not just Palm Sunday? Because we too easily fall into that same trap the crowd fell into, wanting only the "happy days" of Palm Sunday and Easter and skipping over the pain, agony and heartbreak of the week in between.

Philip Yancy, the author I mentioned last week, tells how he grew up in a church which didn't observe the major events of Holy Week. He never attended a Good Friday service. He said they jumped from the hosannas of Palm Sunday to the hallelujahs of Easter avoiding Holy Week which emphasizes deception, desertion, denial, and death.

And, that's the paradox of Palm/Passion Sunday: ecstasy and agony jammed up against each other. It's also the paradox of our lives. Our pain and our joy live side by side and often we feel powerless to do anything. The focus of our Christian faith must be to believe and trust even when it seems out of place or illogical, even when we feel God has failed us or we have failed God. Why?

Because we know the rest of the story! The sadness is not the end!

But if we don't experience it: we won't understand the value of the gift of life and forgiveness Jesus offers us because of the cross.

We won't fully appreciate the victory if we don't understand the battle.

We won't remember to take courage and patiently wait for God when we feel defeated, deceived, or discouraged.

We won't remember that since God was still working for Jesus in the bad times, God will keep working for us in the bad times, too.

Best of all, after we are through the sadness, we can celebrate more fully.

Because, you see, with all of this background and insight into the praising and jeering crowds, Barabbas, and Pilate, the main focus of these scriptures is none of the above. This story is mainly about God. God wasn't subject to the crowds, Barabbas, or Pilate. God used their weaknesses and the circumstances to fulfill God's plan. The crowd didn't really free Barabbas, God freed Barabbas. It wasn't a judicial decision. It wasn't an historical accident. It was a revelation.

The revelation is Jesus died to give new life and to reveal that new life as God's will for all of us. Why? Because God loves us.

While riding in the country, Charles Spurgeon saw a farmer's barn with a weather vane on the arrow of which was inscribed these words: "God is Love." He turned in at the gate and asked the farmer, "What do you mean by that? Do you think God's love is changeable; that it veers about as that arrow turns in the winds?" The farmer said, "Oh, no! I mean whichever way the wind blows, God is still Love."

When the crowd shouted "Hosanna," God loved them.

When they shouted, "Give us Barabbas," God loved them.

Why? I don't know, but I'm thankful because you and I are part of the crowd. God knows us and still calls us into a relationship. It's our choice whether to respond or not. God's love isn't determined by the winds of circumstances or our behavior. God's love is based on God's acceptance of us. It isn't words, but a nonverbal action--Jesus' dying for you and me--which reveals God's true character.

So, what can we say in response to God's love? In the words of our closing hymn:

(Say verbally and use sign language) "My Jesus, I love thee."

SIGNS

Opening:

Touch palm of each hand with second finger of other hand.

Cross wrists with wrists in front of your chest about 8-10 inches.

Open hands, palms facing each other about 14-16 inches apart and drop hands.

Closing:

Touch palm of each hand with second finger of other hand.

Point to self.

Cross arms over chest.

Point above with index finger.