

Prayer: Eternal God, we lay aside all that distracts and burdens us so we may hear your still, small voice speak to us the word of truth and grace. May you be all that we seek or desire. We ask that you meet us in our places of brokenness and need, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

### Stop Them, Jesus!

Some have referenced Palm Sunday as “religion-on-parade” ... or, “faith-with-a-public-face” ... or, a “throw-caution-to-the-winds” expression of religious devotion. When we Christians go public today we usually do it with slogans on t-shirts or bumper stickers – “messages on the front ends of our bodies and on the rear ends of our cars” notes one preacher. “Do you know where you will spend eternity?” “In the event of the Rapture, this car will be empty.” “God loves you; the rest of us think you’re a jerk.” The bumper sticker that I’ve probably seen the most often and some have suggested might be the one that has been around the longest is the one that reads: “Honk if you love Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

How many have seen it? Uh, huh. Now, keep your hands up if you’ve ever done it – you know, honked. This may come as a surprise to you, but I can’t ever remember having honked. I may have, but I don’t remember. I don’t know what it is, but there’s something about the message or the way the message is put that turns me off. Now hear me, it’s not that I don’t love Jesus, because I do, it’s just, I don’t know, maybe it’s being a little bit of a religious snob – you know, too theologically sophisticated to express my faith in that way. I’m just not into bumper sticker religion.

I think part of it is I am judging the car driver’s expression of faith – you know, I wonder how else the person expresses their faith besides honking. I sort of identify with the preacher who yearns to see a bumper sticker that reads: “Tithe if you love Jesus. Anybody can honk.” Or, “Drive courteously if you love Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

The truth of the matter is, I’m really not much for public displays of affection for anything – especially things religious. It’s hard for me to get into some contemporary worship for example. It’s not that I have anything against being enthusiastic when expressing the faith or that I don’t like contemporary music – it’s just I don’t find myself comfortable clapping my hands, swaying back and forth, and standing for long periods of time. This is not a criticism of contemporary worship – it’s confessing a temperament. I have not found worshipping the same way I act, for example, during a basketball game, to be something I am comfortable with.

So, I sometimes wonder how I would have acted if I’d been in the crowd lining the streets when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that Sunday near the Passover. Would I have cut branches from a nearby tree? Would I have taken off my cloak and laid it on the road with the others? Would I have been influenced by the hysteria of the crowd? Would I have known who he was and been willing to symbolically give him the red carpet treatment? Let me come back to those questions in a little while. Let’s review a bit.

Jesus had just past through Jericho. He was on his way to Jerusalem. A rich tax collector, Zacchaeus, stopped by for a look and became a follower. Jesus told those gathered a parable about the immediacy of the Kingdom of God. As he walked the twenty miles from Jericho to Jerusalem, the drama of Holy Week slowly unfolded.

The followers of Jesus had been traveling with him and they heard him describe the future and they had grown weary physically as well as spiritually. Jesus knew that they needed something more than a few spoken words to continue. He knew they were in need of something a bit more visual to inspire them for the challenges that lay ahead. So, sensing that his words alone were not going to be effective any longer – like the prophets of old – he resorted to the use of an object lesson. He tried to frame the truth into a living picture that no one could possibly misunderstand.<sup>3</sup>

Nearing the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples into the village to borrow a colt – or, as other interpretations offer: a “donkey.” Now, the master storyteller has a reason for this strange request. The disciples who go to do as he has instructed have to have on their minds some of his other unforgettable dramatizations – the way he dramatized the Christian life as a city set on a hill- the one where he used a seed as the word of God and people’s hearts as soil – the

one concerning itself with the love of God in the parable of the prodigal son – or the love of humanity in the story of the Good Samaritan. The disciples may not have known where Jesus was going just yet with this one, but his success rate made them confident enough to do as he instructed, seemingly without question.

Jesus surely had on his mind the instructive word according to Zechariah 9:9, where the prophet declared that when God was ready, God's king would come, riding on an ass, a colt, the foal of an ass. The author of the Gospel of Luke notes that this colt had never been ridden. According to references in Numbers and I Samuel, only animals that had never been used as beasts of burden could be considered suitable for sacred purposes.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Jesus' dramatic action was a deliberate claim to be the messiah. Jews were there from all over that part of the world for the Passover. Jesus knew the sacred significance would be known by most.

He also knew that those among whom he would ride would catch the significance of him riding in on a donkey rather than a horse. In Palestine a donkey was understood to be a noble animal – not the beast of burden we regard it as. If a king rode into a land upon a horse, it would be to announce his warring intentions. By Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey he was announcing that his kingship, his kingdom, his ruling role was going to be about love and peace.

So the disciples went into the village and they found the colt as Jesus had told them they would, and while they are untying it the owners questioned them, "Why are you untying the colt?" And the disciples responded as they had been instructed: "The Lord has need of it." Apparently that was all there was to it – no further argument or bartering. Some have suggested that this was thus a prearranged deal with "The Lord has need of it" being the password. For whatever reason, the request was immediately granted.

And so, the colt was brought to Jesus. His followers threw their cloaks on the animal and set Jesus upon it. And, as he rode into the town others took their cloaks off and laid them on the road as he approached. The word spread like wildfire and people flocked to join the party – the coronation parade – the ticker-tape welcome – shouting to one another as they made their way to where it was going down: "Hey, isn't this the guy who raised Lazarus from the dead?" "Isn't he the one who has been healing sick people, curing the lame, and making blind people able to see?"

It had to have been an exciting day – a spontaneous parade – the crowd growing and becoming more and more expectant – emotion pouring into the street – hope beyond hope filling their every step. A big group followed him from Bethany, where he was staying prior to his entry. And as he came over the crest of the hill known as the Mount of Olives, the group from Bethany was met by another crowd of people coming out of Jerusalem – travelers and guests in town for the holy days, as well as the locals, all shouting: "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Or, as the author of the Gospel of Mark puts it: "Hosanna!"

Now, the infamous Pharisees were also present. To be sure, their shouts weren't as loud. Actually, they were a little concerned. They were afraid that the gathering would incite a riot in the capital city and that the Roman authorities would be aroused and take it out on them – their people – as they had so often before. They wanted to keep the peace with the Romans. Besides, they questioned whether Jesus deserved all the attention. So, they told him to quiet the people down. The actions of the crowd were altogether undignified and the Pharisees – so typical of religious stuffed-shirt types who begin to worship their position more than God – want to stop the fun – the excitement – the extemporaneousness of it all. They want to get the event under control. To which Jesus replied: "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out."

People of faith – followers of Christ's – hear words like those spoken by the Pharisees – the powerful – every day. Jesus told us to do one thing: love – love God – love one another – love the stranger in our midst – love our enemies. Never did Jesus instruct us to judge one another – to punish one another – to exploit one another – to indoctrinate one another – to ignore, oppress, harass, or kill one another.<sup>5</sup>

Those with political, social and economic power in this world still suggest that their control of things would have an easier time if Christ's message would be accepted in moderation – if we wouldn't take this loving everyone – caring about everyone – quite so seriously. They really would like us to tone it down when it comes to affecting their bottom line – their control – their power – their wealth. When love guides our every decision some pretty amazing things happen. Loving others involves us putting others before accumulating material things that exploit vulnerable workers and leave huge carbon footprints and toxic waste and uses essential resources like clean water and open land for nonessentials.

Loving others demands that we speak out for those who can't speak for themselves. Loving others demands that we point out the injustices that shove some folks to the edges of life so that we can build bigger and bigger houses and larger and larger tax breaks can be offered the wealthiest among us. Loving others – especially the disadvantaged of mind, body, or circumstance – intellect, opportunity, or health – changes the decisions we make and the way we make decisions. It demands that our voices not be silent when the most powerful among us try to influence or intimidate us with their money, their wisdom, or their position. When we don't let our voices be silenced by those who are fearful of a world where systems are put in place to help those unable to help themselves and decisions are made that just might allow others to enjoy the same comforts and safety nets that many of the rest of us are privileged to enjoy – when we don't let our voices be silenced, the world as we know it changes.<sup>6</sup>

We remember more than a sacred historical event on Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday also gives us an opportunity to proclaim with our voices and our possessions that the King has indeed come into the world – into our lives – our hearts – and he is making a difference in how we live – how we announce his presence among us.

Andrea LaSonde Anastos closed her sermon from which I based my reflections on these words from those with authority, by noting: Palm Sunday offers us the opportunity “to take off that elegant cloak that shows our status so effectively and spread it on the ground as a declaration of where our real values lie. Today is the chance to begin the confrontation in our own hearts between our attachment to the world and our claim to be disciples of the one who called us – us, you and me – to be love incarnate.”<sup>7</sup>

“Stop them, Jesus!” the Pharisees ordered Jesus. Today we are faced with a choice of whether we will walk the way of the cross with the one who refuses to stop loving us or whether we will let our voices be silenced thus necessitating Jesus having to indeed rely on the stones to do his proclaiming. Frankly folks, the Pharisees have gotten their wish if we only sit in the safety and comfort of our cars and honk of our love of Jesus. Our voices have indeed been silenced – no one really pays attention to us when we let the horns of our cars be our only witness of our love of Jesus. The Pharisee types in our world have plenty to fear when we replace our car horns with difficult decision-making and we do things that proclaim that the poor are important to us and that justice is more important than wealth or power or fame or influence or comfort.

Let us pray.

Prayer: Unstoppable Love, would you ride into our souls today. Would you ride into our souls and bring us the ability to live as you live, to love as you love, and to die to everything that limits us. Inspire us with peace - infuse us with glory so that nothing on Earth can stop us from being fully who you invite us to be. Pour out such passion for the creation we share with you, that the stony shell we build around our hearts breaks open, allowing love to be our response to any trial, any fear, any threat, and any pain. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

1. William A. Ritter, “Honk If You Love Jesus,” Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc.), 0-000-2300.
2. Ibid.
3. William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), p. 249.
4. Tony W. Cartledge, “The problem with palms,” March 4, 2003, [biblicalrecorder.org/content/opinion/2003\\_4\\_2003/ed040303the.shtml](http://biblicalrecorder.org/content/opinion/2003_4_2003/ed040303the.shtml). Retrieved October 5, 2009.

5. Andrea LaSonde Anastos, "Hosanna?" The Clergy Journal, January/February 2010, p. 23.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.