

Sometimes We Get It Right

Richmond's First Baptist Church, March 24, 2013

Palm Sunday

Luke 19:28-40

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (NRSV).

Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, and it's a good thing to be able to acknowledge the one and admit the other. So, let me admit: I'm not very strong in Math. I'm not sure why. Maybe I was out sick that day. But it may have something to do with the way I think about numbers. For some reason I picture the numbers from 1-20 climbing up a steep incline and then dropping off in a straight vertical column to 39, and then another column from 40 to 59, another from 60 to 79, and finally one last column from 80-99. After that they just scatter all over the page. So, if you ask me where the number 14 is I can tell you: it's right there. The number 63? There. The number 148? I have no idea. I think that pattern was imprinted on my brain when I was in first grade and we wrote the numbers from 1-100 in columns. At least that explains why I picture most of the numbers that way. I don't know how I got the idea that the first 20 numbers climb up a ramp. But you can see how it might make it difficult for me to perform simple

operations like addition and subtraction. To this day if you ask me to add 17 and 7 I start at 17 and count up the last part of that ramp 1-2-3 and then down the column to 24. I don't have an abacus in my brain where I can slide the beads and get the answer. When it comes to Math my brain is more like a game of chutes and ladders.

So, when I went off to prep school at the age of 15 I was placed in a class called Math 21, right where I should be at my age, but within a few weeks it became clear that I was way behind where I should be. My kindly teacher, Mr. Dimmock, took me aside and told me he was going to send me down to Math 12. "If you catch up in a few weeks you can come back," he said. But I didn't catch up. My teacher in Math 12 was a man named Mr. Clements, who looked a good bit like Walter Matthau and had the same grumpy disposition. Math 12 didn't seem one bit easier than Math 21, and when I got back my first exam I wasn't surprised that I got an "F," I was only surprised that I got some of the answers right.

I tell you that story simply to make this point: that the Christian life can feel like that, like we're trying to do something we don't have any natural aptitude for, something that has a lot of complicated rules, where we will be judged by impossibly high standards. Jesus, after all, says things like "Love your enemies," when most days we are doing well to love our friends. He says, "Turn the other cheek," when everything in us wants to hit back. The surprise for us doesn't come when we get something wrong, but when we get something right. We are so sinful, so human, and sometimes when we come to church the preacher reminds us of that as if we didn't already know it. I've done it myself. On Palm Sunday I have said, "The same crowd that welcomed Jesus with shouts of "Hosanna!" would later condemn him with shouts of "Crucify!" I did it to remind my

congregation that we are hopelessly fickle, that we are the kind of people who can sing hymns in church on Sunday morning and curse our co-workers on Monday afternoon. But to be fair to the text—today’s text from Luke 19:28-40—it doesn’t tell us anything about what happened later in the week; it only tells us what happened on this day, the one we have come to call Palm Sunday.

And on this day, apparently, the people got it right.

It started when Jesus got close to Jerusalem. He had come up the road from Jericho, a long climb out of Jordan River valley to the mountaintop, a journey of some 18 miles and all of it uphill. A whole crowd of people had come with him, all of them traveling to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. Some of them had been traveling with him for days. They had heard him call Zacchaeus down out of the tree in Jericho, watched him heal blind Bartimaeus. Even if they hadn’t known him before they would have begun to believe that he was something special. When he got close to the Mount of Olives he sent two of his disciples into the village ahead and told them that as they entered it they would find a donkey’s colt that had never been ridden. “Untie it and bring it here,” he said, “and if anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

And here’s the remarkable thing: they didn’t ask Jesus why he needed a donkey’s colt. They didn’t ask him what he planned to do next. They didn’t ask what all this was about. They simply did what he told them to do. In other words, they obeyed him, and that—in itself—is remarkable. But listen to how perfectly they did it. Luke says, “So, those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ They said, ‘The Lord needs

it.’ Then they brought it to Jesus.” It was as if he wrote the script and they followed it, without question, and even if they had done nothing else that day they would have done that much right.

But then they did this: they threw their cloaks on the colt and set Jesus on it, and as he made his way down from the Mount of Olives the people kept spreading their cloaks on the road as if they were rolling out the red carpet for Jesus. And as he came near to the city of Jerusalem, the whole multitude of disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” If you have a good ear, you might remember that this is almost exactly what the angels sang on the night Jesus was born: “Glory to God in the highest heaven” (Luke 2:14). I can’t be sure what moved the people to do what they did or say what they said, but apparently it was the right thing to do and say, and we know this first of all because the Pharisees were against it—“Teacher,” they said, “order your disciples to stop!”—and secondly because Jesus didn’t stop them. He said, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out,” suggesting that what they were doing was exactly what should be done on a day like that.

So, no, we human beings don’t always get it right. We are fickle, frail, and fallible. But sometimes, to our great surprise, we do, and that first Palm Sunday was one of those days. 1) Two of Jesus’ disciples obeyed him perfectly, 2) the “whole multitude of disciples” recognized him for who he was, and 3) they began to “praise God joyfully with a loud voice” for all the deeds of power they had seen. That’s exactly the kind of response God might want from his people when his beloved son rides into town, and on

that day, that's exactly what he got. So, let's don't talk about what happened next—not today. Let's pretend we don't even know that part of the story. Let's just look at this crowd—spreading their cloaks on the road, praising God joyfully with a loud voice, saying “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord—let's just look at them and say, “Good for you!” We don't always get it right, but sometimes we do, and this was one of those times. It was remarkable, and Luke was right to include it in his Gospel. But what may be even more remarkable is that sometimes we still get it right.

Let's talk about that for a minute.

Luke says that these people were praising God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power *they had seen*, and one of those deeds of power would have been the healing of blind Bartimaeus. Luke doesn't call him by name; we get that information from Mark. But other than that the two stories are practically identical. Near the end of chapter 18 Luke says, “As he approached Jericho a blind man was sitting by the road, begging.” When he heard that it was Jesus going by he began to shout out, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!” The crowds told him to keep quiet, but he just shouted louder until Jesus said, “Bring him here.” He asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” And the blind man said, “Lord, let me see again.” Jesus said, “Receive your sight, your faith has saved you.” Immediately, he regained his sight and began to follow Jesus, and if he followed him all the way to Jerusalem he was probably one of the people in that Palm Sunday crowd.

Now, if you had seen something like that with your own eyes, or better yet, if you had been the one whose eyes had been opened, don't you think you would “praise God joyfully with a loud voice”? The remarkable thing to me is that most of us haven't seen

deeds of power like that and yet here we are. While most of the world is out there, going on with their regular Sunday business, we are in here singing “Hosanna!” and praising God joyfully with a loud voice. We must have seen enough, or heard enough, to convince us that Jesus is worthy of praise, and we’re doing our best to give it to him. I’m sure there are some—in this crowd as there were in that crowd—who have had first-hand experience of Jesus’ deeds of power, and they should be singing the loudest of all, just like the formerly blind Bartimaeus, who had already proven that he could raise his voice. Can you imagine how instead of saying, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me,” he began to shout, “Jesus *is* the son of David! He *has* had mercy on me!”? Today we join him in his praise.

I can imagine that after Bartimaeus was healed everybody in town wanted to follow Jesus, wanted to see what he would do next. And when he started up the road toward Jerusalem they probably shouted, “Let’s go!” and fell in line behind him. It’s not like that for us, is it? Of all the voices you hear in a given week how many are saying, “Let’s follow Jesus”? They say plenty of other things. They say, “Let’s follow the money, let’s follow the latest fad, let’s follow the path of least resistance,” but not many of them say, “Let’s follow Jesus.” Sometimes it’s just that one voice on Sunday morning saying it and if you didn’t come to church you wouldn’t hear it at all. But look at you people! You’ve not only heard that voice you have made up your minds to follow Jesus. You have followed him here, to Palm Sunday worship in this beautiful sanctuary, and you will follow him later, when he moves back out onto the mission field again. We don’t always get it right, but today you have, and I want to commend you for it!

And finally, you can imagine that when the disciples set Jesus on that donkey and the first few people began to raise their voices in praise it was natural for everyone else to join in. Not so for us. Most of the rest of the world isn't singing Christ's praises. If we do it at all, we do it not because others are doing it but in spite of the fact that they aren't. We do it because we believe, in our hearts, that Jesus is Lord. Some of you can still remember when you came down the aisle to make a profession of faith. The whole church didn't come with you; you probably came on your own. It may have been the loneliest walk you ever took. But you did it anyway because that truth was burning inside you and you couldn't rest until you had blurted it out publicly: Jesus is Lord! And by your words and your deeds you have been sharing that truth ever since.

You see, I believe God sets high standards for a reason. I believe he wants us to be always moving onward and upward, and yet he is not blind to the small steps of our progress. Back in that Math class in prep school I kept at it, and got some tutoring from a kid from my dorm who was in the same class. When it came time for the final exam Mr. Clements took me aside and said, "Look, Jim. You've got an F average in this class. There is no way you're going to pass. But lately you've been showing some improvement, and if you can pass the final I'll send you on up to Math 21 and see how you do there. If you make it, you can stay, and if not, I'll see you again."

So, I studied hard for that final exam, really hard, and when I got it back I was thrilled to find that I'd gotten a C-. Near the back of that blue-book exam Mr. Clements had commented on the way I'd worked out one of my answers, "Shows savvy!" he wrote, with an exclamation point after it. I had to ask another student what the word *savvy* meant, and he pushed his glasses up on his nose and told me it was from the French verb

savoir, which means “to know.” “He’s saying it looks like you know what you’re doing,” he explained. And that was a real shocker. I’m not sure I had any idea what I was doing, but somehow, on that day, I got it right.

It’s true. We human beings are fickle, frail, and fallible. Before this week is out we may have condemned Christ. We must always be aware of our weaknesses. But at the same time we need to celebrate our strengths. How about you? Have you recognized Jesus for who he really is, even for a moment? Have you fallen in line behind him and followed, even for a few steps? Have you done exactly what he told you to do, even once? Have you spoken, or sung, or even shouted his praises? Have you told even one other person what he means to you? Then congratulations! On that day, in that moment, you got it right! And on this day, in this moment, we pause to celebrate. Lord knows we don’t always get it right, but sometimes, sometimes...

...we do!

—*Jim Somerville, 2013*