

## Faith On Parade

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Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 21:1-11

The first few years I served in this church, we had our Palm Sunday parade indoors. We gathered in the entry room, marched through the fireplace room, and into the sanctuary. It may be that the first year it was raining, and no one wanted to get wet. But no one was especially eager to move it outdoors after that, even when the weather was nice. Now you at least humor me and tolerate marching around the parking lot. But how many of you would be willing to start the parade somewhere in town and march down the street to get here? Would you participate in a public parade that identified you with Jesus?

Today we celebrate Jesus' parade into the city of Jerusalem. Jesus rode a donkey while people spread their cloaks and leafy branches on the road. Some went ahead and others followed shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Would you join a parade like that? Or would you be afraid someone might think you were a crazy religious fanatic?

Many people stay quiet about their faith because they don't want to offend neighbors who might practice another religion. And that is a legitimate concern around here. We live in a diverse area of the world, and Christians have a bad reputation in some circles as being close-minded, judgmental and anti-gay. That's probably because the only Christians who speak up are those who are against abortion or gay marriage, or are trying to convert people. But not all Christians are close-minded, judgmental and anti-gay. If we remain silent, no one will be offended. But who will be left to speak? Are we willing to let the vocal fringe be the only ones to represent Christianity? Is it possible to share the story and message of Jesus without insisting that you are right and everyone else is wrong? Is it possible to talk about faith without judging others?

Many Christians are shy about their faith, and tend to look inward rather than outward. Sometimes we get the idea that our main purpose is to take care of our own spiritual needs among the church family. And I'll confess, one of the reasons I like a small church is because we have the potential to be like a family, where people know and love each other, and watch out for each other. I like to be known and loved. But just focusing on our own people can lead us in the wrong direction.

In a book called The Company of Strangers, Parker Palmer talks about something he calls "the tyranny of the intimate," or the temptation to make mere friendship the goal of religion. He claims that if we only value close, warm, lasting friendships, then we are forced to turn our backs on the public, and our churches become clubs of people with similar backgrounds and temperaments. Relationships in the church can't be determined by compatibility, by whether or not we have the potential to be close friends. According to Palmer, our relationships in the church must be grounded in God and aimed, not at intimacy, but at discovering and living and

proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Feeling close to other people is a welcome by-product, but it is not the goal, and not even a requirement.

Now that may seem odd for me to be saying, since I am always encouraging you to sign up for a small group, or to meet with a partner for prayer, especially during lent. I do want you all to get to know each other, to pray with and for each other, and to share on a deeper level. It *is* important to have people in the church that you trust and can go to in time of need. One of the things I love about the Wednesday morning Bible study, and the Bible study after worship, is that people are so willing to share personal questions and talk about their lives. And I would love to see more groups like that here. Small groups and the friendships people build in the church do knit us together into a body of love. And I encourage them. But there has to be more than that.

Love is not necessarily the same as intimacy. Usually there's at least one person in any church you have no desire to be friends with. It might be someone with different political views, or a different personal style. But it may also be a person who challenges and stretches you closer to the kingdom of God simply because they are different from you. As Jesus said, it's easy to love your friends. Even tax-collectors do the same. But if we can work with and care for people who are different or even strange to us, then we are living the love of Christ.

Jesus didn't have long-term intimate relationships with everyone. He was close with his disciples and probably a few others. But his relationships with the public consisted of teaching to large crowds of people, and one-time encounters with individuals like the woman at the well, the rich young ruler, the woman with a hemorrhage, or Pilate. Some of these were deep, personal encounters, but they didn't turn into lasting friendships. Some of them were actually conflicts. But they were God's revelation to the people involved, as well as to the world.

Jesus was able to have compassion on the crowds and interact with strangers, not because of their potential to become close personal friends, but because they were fellow human beings, made by God and belonging to God, and these interactions revealed God's truth and love. And likewise, we don't have to be close friends with everyone in the church. Neither is it our job to become close friends with every stranger outside the church. Our purpose as Christians and as a church is not to make friends, but to make disciples, so that together we may shine as lights in the world.

Yesterday I went to a conference sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force for Welcoming Resources, called "Building an Inclusive Church." The point of the conference was to learn how to be more welcoming to all kinds of people, and there were all kinds of people there. There were a few plain vanilla heterosexuals like me, and a few parents of people who are lesbian or gay. But there was also a gay man of Mexican descent, lesbian women from Long Island, and one Presbyterian man, who showed up the second day of the conference as a woman. He called himself – not trans-sexual or bi-sexual, but bi-gender. I'd never heard of that before. He also happened to be his church's clerk of session, and most of his fellow church members only knew him as a man. It was fascinating to hear some of these people talk about their stories, their struggles with the church and with faith, and how they ended up where they are today.

One of the things I learned at this conference was a practice for building relationships with people who are not necessarily potential friends, especially with people with whom we may disagree. It's an intentional conversation that is not a debate or trying to change someone's mind. Rather it involves listening in order to understand the other person, what motivates them, what's behind the things they say and believe, and trying to find common ground, shared values or experiences.

We also talked about how people use scripture. Often when people disagree, they use scripture to prove a point. But this conference challenged us to focus on the passages that have meaning for us personally. What's your favorite scripture passage? And what's the story behind the scripture you chose? What does it mean to you?

There are so many life-giving passages and stories to choose from. At the conference people called out their favorites: "Do justice and love kindness..." (Micah 6:8), "God will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37), "God so loved the world" (John 3:16), "Nothing can separate us from God's love" (Rom. 8), "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another" (John 13). When Jesus paraded into Jerusalem, the people shouted "Hosanna!" and quoted from Psalm 118 (vs. 26) "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." If you were to join a parade in honor of Jesus today, what scripture would you want to proclaim?

It's not as though we have to understand everything before we can begin to talk about our faith. The crowds on Palm Sunday didn't really understand what Jesus was up to. They were just celebrating that Jesus was there. They knew part of the message, and they made it known. They weren't being proud or self-righteous, or forcing their opinion on others. They were just grateful that this prophet, this man, was with them.

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week. This week is *the most important time* in the Christian calendar. I encourage you to take the time to observe it, take the time to identify yourself with Jesus, and stay with him for his final confrontation with those who opposed him. On Maundy Thursday we gather at night to remember Jesus' last supper with his disciples. We share in communion and then read the account of his prayer in the garden, and his arrest and trial before the high priest. Then on Good Friday at noon we gather with other Christian congregations in town, starting at Mt. Zion Baptist Church down on Shor Avenue, and process solemnly from church to church, marking his crucifixion and death, God's life poured out for us in love. If you can't make either of those services, many churches have a Friday evening service you can attend. And then, of course we will celebrate Easter next Sunday.

You don't really have to parade down the street shouting hosanna to identify yourself with Jesus. But you can let people know that you go to church. You can talk about what that means to you, and what this week means to you, what questions it raises, what hope it offers. You can talk with people without arguing or debating, simply by sharing your experiences and listening. You can even invite someone to come to church with you. Here we find forgiveness, love and life in Christ Jesus. It's not something to keep to ourselves. Find a way to share it with someone this week. Amen.

