

“The Crowd Changed”
Matthew 21:1-11 Matthew 27:11-54
April 13, 2014 Year A, Passion Palm Sunday
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Jesus enters the town of Jerusalem on a donkey. He doesn't plan on leaving that town; he knows what he's heading for. The religious leaders who've been out to get him feel their day has come and it isn't long now before Jesus is arrested, charges put against him, and even Pilate goes along with it for fear of the crowds.

Today's the day we remember this shift in emotion and theme, and how the crowd changed. Jesus stays the same, he's humble throughout. But the crowd, and us in celebration today start out really joyful and excited, waving our palm branches to set the mood, the choir processing in song to remember Jesus coming into town and the peoples' welcoming this hero. But at some point, even we need to change our focus. We need to remember that not only are we part of the reason Jesus went to Jerusalem, but we are part of the reason Jesus died there.

Tom Long, while he was a distinguished teacher of preaching at Emory University, he was featured on a national radio talk show in the week after September 11, 2001. There were also two other religious leaders tied in with that talk show, all of them asked to share how their faith responded to 9-11. They would have about one minute for their response.

I don't know what you would say in one minute about how your faith responded to 9-11, but this is what he mumbled out when asked specifically, “What the Christian faith has to say about those who did these terrible acts.”

“Well, our faith teaches us that we are all sinners in need of forgiveness, but that Jesus died to save sinners.” Are you with him so far? “In every situation, the Christian faith teaches us to look for God's will, to see reconciliation and redemption.” Still with him? “We can understand evil because our faith teaches us that we commit evil.” The more he goes on, perhaps, the more squirming you do, but when you look at the confessions of the church, when you look at the biblical evidence, he hits the nail on the head and drives it home. But it takes humility to admit that.

“The radio host turned to the next religious leader, a man who was a representative of another great religion. That guest began by saying, “Let me just say that I think that what the reverend said was the worst thing I've ever heard. The people who did this were inhuman and evil. We need to find them and punish them without any of this redemption business. Nothing anybody did deserved

this...” Tom said, “At that moment it struck him how very strange it is to be somebody trying to follow Jesus.”

Punished without any of this redemption business! God could have taken that approach, but I doubt any of us would be here this morning if God chose to do that. Jesus, who was silent before his accusers could have put them to shame through whatever means: verbal debate, scriptural interpretation and authority, healing miracles, or calling on his disciples to fight for him, let alone legions of angel armies. Jesus could have taken the political approach that everyone expected, that everyone was excited about as they waved those symbols of Jewish nationalism we call palm branches. He knew the leaders were evil, they did evil, and they fearfully shunned the good because it threatened their position and power and prestige. And he knew they were not only hurting innocent people, but they were deceiving themselves, even as they were cloaked in righteousness. They believed their own lies. But Jesus prays for them, forgives them, because he’s in the redemption business, not the revenge business.

This redemption actually takes more courage than revenge. It takes more courage because it involves direct suffering, of standing in the tragic gap created by a world that is stuck at low levels of spirituality and lashes out as people defend their positions. And yet in Jesus we see what it takes to embrace suffering, and why.

Though we didn’t read them, the lectionary also has a passage from Philippians and one from Isaiah. In Philippians (2:5-11) we read that the attitude of Jesus involves humility and obedience; and *that’s* when God uses you. In Isaiah (50:4-9a) the thought is similar, that God’s suffering servant doesn’t shy away from the pain, but in all humility faces it because there’s such a relationship between the suffering servant and God that the pain is secondary to the primary thing involving trust and help and knowing that your actions are being divinely used; used to sustain the weary, to help those who need it most, used to bring redemption.

Jesus knew his calling, and he knew it wasn’t an easy calling; but isn’t it amazing that just knowing a calling gives direction and purpose? He sets his face like flint, intent on doing God’s will and fulfilling his purpose.

Paulo Coelho, a Brazilian author who wrote The Alchemist and several other books, has a main premise that helps give us insight this morning. He says that most people don’t follow their dreams, don’t discover or feel themselves worthy enough to live out their calling and purpose. But his point is, that it’s possible to discover your purpose and live it out. But he recognizes the patterns that interfere.

He says there are four obstacles that get in our way and because most of us don’t have the courage to confront our own dream, these obstacles make good

excuses. One is that we are told from childhood on, that everything we want to do is impossible. He says, eventually, there comes a time when our personal calling is so deeply buried in our soul, so covered up by this message of impossibility that it seems invisible, lost. (But it's still there! It's buried, but it's still there!)

Second, the obstacle is love. Love! Once we know what we are to do, we get afraid that if we abandon everything in order to pursue our dream, we will hurt those we love. But he says this actually is backwards because if we are truly following a dream that's planted deep in our soul, those who are in a relationship of love with us will surround us with encouragement, they will want us to be who we are; they will even accompany us on the journey.

Love becomes a stimulus. But even with that we hit the third obstacle: fear of the defeats that we will face. Even Jesus faces these. In living out his ministry he has defeats. He can't convert everyone's hearts. Not everyone is interested in what he has to say, or who he is. Looking at the gospels we see different scenes of his ministry and life; we see, for example, a rich young man in a contemplative pose coming to Jesus with a question. Jesus has just told him that he lacks one thing: he needs to go and sell all his possessions. Then Jesus says, "Come, follow me." Jesus lost that one; this rich young man walks away sad. Even Jesus faces defeats.

Coelho asks, "are defeats necessary?" And he says, "Necessary or not, they happen. When we first begin fighting for our dream, we have no experience and make many mistakes. The secret of life, though, is to fall seven times and to get up eight times. Why is it so important to live our personal calling if we are only going to suffer more than other people?" Sounds like something Jesus might have prayed, in the garden, just before he was arrested. Why is it important to do this if it means such intense suffering? Because in overcoming defeats we gain confidence, we know in the silence of our own hearts that we are proving ourselves worthy of the miracle of life. It's as we overcome defeats that one day we find ourselves on the verge of our dreams being realized.

But at that point, rather than euphoria, comes the fourth obstacle: thinking we are not worthy of this joy. There are so many people in this world who don't live their dreams, why should we be among those few who do? Do we really deserve it? At this point it's easy to make stupid mistakes and see all the years of suffering, all the defeats we've overcome, all the struggling in your own heart about following this dream that once was buried; it's easy to see it all happen for nothing. This is a crucial point; will we live out our calling or not?

How would you like it, Christian, if Jesus triumphantly rode into Jerusalem, Palm Sunday on the verge of the Passion, but then he hid, avoided capture, rather,

worked a political solution from the underground? How would you like it if he got to that point and said, “I don’t think I can do it”? Which he did say, in the garden, “God, please take this cup from me, but not my will, but yours be done.” Thank God Jesus didn’t follow through on his fears and doubts, Jesus didn’t cave in to the tremendous suffering ahead.

Jesus was obedient to the dream, to the calling of living out faith, obedient in trusting God’s larger vision, God’s larger purpose, God’s larger love, a love which is offered even for those who seem unlovable. And that’s the test of a calling, to discern whether its from God or not: does it lead to a larger love, and expanding faith, more inclusion and unity rather than a tribalism that excludes and condemns those who are different?

Sheila Walsh writes in The Women of Faith Daily Devotional (Zondervan, 2002, pg. 163) about her life reflecting one of her grandmother’s quotes, which said, “I need to be rubbed out and drawn back in again.” Sheila says, “I feel as if that is what God did with me. Those who share my tendency to clinical depression will understand that there are overwhelming moments when you feel as if life will never be all right again. When I had my first major bout with the illness, I had never felt so hopeless or helpless in my life. I was crying out inside, but no one but the Lord could hear. Even though my cries to God were faint, God is so merciful, a joyful deliverer who rescues his children and sets their feet in spacious places.” And then she says this as she reflects on her own experience: “God does not box us in to squeeze a reluctant assent to his will. Rather, God sets us free in wide-open spaces with the wind of the Spirit at our backs.”

Jesus, God’s suffering servant, endures the cross, facing the brokenness of the whole world, even his enemies, to the point of crying out to God, “Why have you forsaken me?” That cross was the loneliest place in the world. God can help us in discovering and living our callings. God helps us to live through the suffering that we will certainly face. God helps us, especially when we’re on the verge of realizing our dream, to follow through in humility and obedience so that we too may glorify God for the entire world to see. Thanks be to God for Palm / Passion Sunday when Jesus came to give his all for the world, even though the crowd changed as the spiritually proud became the devil’s foot soldiers. May God help us live into a larger love that sustains us and proclaims the goodness of God for all the world. And may God be glorified now and forever, Amen.