

Kelly Boubel Shriver
Peoples Presbyterian Church
March 20, 2016

John 12:12-19
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Palm Sunday

PSALM 118:1-2, 19-29

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!

²Let Israel say,
"His steadfast love endures forever."

¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.

²⁰This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

²²The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

²³This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

²⁶Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.

²⁸You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.

²⁹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

JOHN 12:9-19

⁹ When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the

chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

12 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

'Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!'

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

¹⁵'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!'

¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. ¹⁷So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. ¹⁸It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. ¹⁹The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'

SERMON

Can I be honest about something? Palm Sunday is probably my least favorite Sunday of the year to preach. I mean, I've only been at this preaching thing half a decade, which is nothing in the span of a full career, but I'm already bored by this day, and I suspect that if I'm bored of preaching it, you're probably bored of hearing it, too. The message of Palm Sunday usually goes something like this: We are expecting a King, a great and mighty leader, we want Jesus to come galloping in here on his big, white horse with a sword in hand to crush the Romans or whatever evil we experience in the world around us. We get really hawkish and we want a powerful Commander in Chief. Hey look, here comes Jesus! But, what is that? Jesus is coming on a donkey, a silly, braying, low to the ground, humble donkey. He's not the king we expect...not powerful or wearing armor or ready to crack down on the Romans or anything.

He comes as a dove, not a hawk. And, I don't know about you, but I guess I'm bored with that message...Jesus the subversive, unexpected Prince of Peace. It's not that it's not an important thing to preach about, I mean, it totally is, but it's so expected on Palm Sunday, I kind of tune out and turn my brain off, but taking a power nap in the middle of the service isn't really the point of the sermon, most especially for the preacher!

So, I'm kind of glad this year that we're reading the Palm Sunday story about of the gospel of John. This is like the abridged version of the story. Jesus is coming, he rode a donkey, the end. It's far shorter than the other three gospels...which go on and on about where the donkey came from and what the crowd was doing and all that. John is short, sweet, and to the point: Jesus went to Jerusalem on a donkey, people put down palm branches.

And I like John for that. I can almost hear his boredom with that part of the story, as well. But John then tacks on some other details that the other authors ignore. First of all, before Jesus even enters into Jerusalem, we get this little tidbit about the leaders. See, they've heard all about the crowds Jesus amassed after raising Lazarus from the dead. They're afraid, and so they're plotting behind closed doors to put both Jesus and Lazarus to death.

Now, this might seem strange to us. I mean, sure the leaders aren't cast as great figures in the book of John, but why would the good, Jewish priests be plotting to kill two good Jewish boys? Jesus and Lazarus aren't the enemies, the Romans are. The Romans are the ones who marched into Israel and occupied the land, not Jesus. But the problem is, Jesus attracts crowds. People are into the idea of a

man who can raise people from the dead. And the Romans, they're not into crowds. Crowds kind of freak them out, because large groups of occupied people, they could revolt, they could cause a ruckus, they could fight back. And so the Roman army got really, really good and squashing any possible rebellion. They kept control of the land with an iron fist and a real intolerance for anyone who acted outside of the norms, who stirred up people, who gathered crowds...really no matter why the crowd had gathered. So, these Jewish leaders, they were scared. Because if Rome got ticked off at Jesus and his crowds, the army wasn't going to distinguish between this group of Jews and that group of Jews. They were all going to be crushed, which is, in fact, exactly what ended up happening about 40 years later. Rome got fed up with the Jewish rebellion, and so the army destroyed them. Leveled the temple, turning it into dust and rubble, and wiping out most of the population.

So these Jewish leaders, they think it's probably better to kill Lazarus, and especially Jesus, in the hopes that it will make an example of them and dispel the crowd, thus protecting the rest of the Jewish people. Get rid of Jesus, get rid of the crowd, save most of the people, Rome will just move along, nothing to see here. It also sort of helps that Jesus made them really, profoundly uncomfortable.

So, on Facebook and Instagram and Twitter and all sorts of other social media sites there's kind of a way people tend to interact with one another. There are expectations and norms for how we behave and how we portray ourselves online.

It's totally acceptable to post photos of your kids playing nicely at the park or the really great frittata you cooked last night, but you're

unlikely to see a photo of your grandchildren throwing a tantrum in the middle of the Kroger. We curate the presence we have online. We put up our best selves. One of the great taboos on Facebook is the merest mention of divorce. A friend of mine from high school got a divorce a few years ago, and it was weird because I had no idea what happened. Just one day, on facebook, all of her photos of him were gone and her name had changed. There are expectations for social media, and people generally don't want to hear your sad news. They want to see cat videos, not hear about your run with norovirus last week.

And it's not just social media where we have expectations of polite behavior. If you run into someone you know at the grocery store and say, "Hey, how are you?" the appropriate response is "I'm doing well, how are you?" I don't think very many of us would be all that happy to be lassoed into a conversation over the bananas about your friend's uncle's recent cancer diagnosis. How are you? I'm fine! That's enough, thank you very much.

This is what Jesus wasn't very good at. Jesus wasn't really a polite conversation, squeaky clean facebook profile kind of guy. He's the one who would answer that question, "How are you?" truthfully, no matter how awkward it would get. He makes the leadership uncomfortable because he's a charismatic, straight shooter of a teacher and miracle worker, and people like that. The gospel of John says "look, the world has gone after him!" Jesus tended to attract people, in part, because he told the truth about what it feels like to be human. He knew the secrets people kept, and loved them anyway. The woman sitting by the well, the blind beggar on the side

of the road, the woman who bled for years and years, the tax collectors, and so many more.

One of my favorite facebook groups is a group of clergy moms. We're all pastors, and we all have young kids. And I love that group because everyone is pretty honest with each other. There are a lot of days when I really love my kids, but I don't really like them. There are a lot of days when I feel just too frustrated and cranky to be a really good mom. And I'm thankful for a group of other moms who get it, and who are willing to be honest with me when they don't really like their kids that much, either. It's not the shiny, public, polished facebook image that everyone expects, it's a place where we can be a bit more honest with one another.

And this is just one of those things about Jesus that I really like. Jesus has no patience for false piety or pretending to be something you're not. He tells the Pharisees, the good, upstanding religious rule followers, you know, you're just like whitewashed tombs. You look really nice, but you're all dark and creepy and gross inside. I think if Jesus were on facebook he'd be uncomfortably honest, and that he'd tire of the perfect photos so many of us put up.

This is the Jesus we get on Palm Sunday in the book of John...a guy who is honest, and just himself, who has been known for simply loving people the way they are. It's a pretty attractive picture, and even aside from raising a guy from the dead, an understandable reason for people to follow him. And this the Jesus we'll continue to see throughout Holy Week. He's just himself: we hear him praying in the garden for God to take away the burden he knows he's called to carry. We see him at the table with his friends, enjoying a meal

together, brokenhearted over the betrayal of Judas. I mean, on the cross, he's about as honest as it comes. His last few words are direct, and come from his deepest needs: I'm thirsty, forgive them, I'm alone, God, why have you forsaken me? And I love Jesus for this. As we've seen in the gospel of John, Jesus is profoundly human, and he's honest about it, and that's worth our time and attention, especially in this Holy Week.

So, yes, let's certainly welcome the unexpected King into Jerusalem, and let's walk with Jesus through this week of bread and wine, of death and life, of dark and light. But let's do it with an eye toward what is real and concrete, and what is honest even when it's hard to face. And let's give thanks to God for a savior who is honest with us, about himself, and about who we are, and yet loves us anyway.