

"HUMBLED AND EXALTED"
Luke 19:28-40 Philippians 2:1-11
April 14, 2019 Palm Sunday
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Philippians 2:1-11 (The Message)

¹⁻⁴ If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you *care*— then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

⁵⁻⁸ Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human!* Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

⁹⁻¹¹ Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God.

It really wasn't much of a parade. It's not like he was the winner of the World Series or the Super Bowl. It was just a guy riding on a young horse. And it wasn't even his colt- it was a borrowed farm animal.

This parade was nothing like the ones Caesar orchestrated. Caesar's parades included long lines of strong soldiers, fierce military horses, chariots decked out with the latest weaponry. Caesar's parades were lined for miles with cheering crowds of people who knew better than to remain silent at the spectacle of Rome's unlimited and merciless power.

Jesus's paltry little parade was the culmination of his three year ministry. Everything he did led him to this place and this time. Although he was warned not to go to the holy city Jesus never wavered. He knew what was waiting for him there and he went anyway.

In Luke's telling of the story, there are no palm branches, only people putting their coats on the ground- like rolling out the red carpet for a rock star. We don't know how many people witnessed this little parade into the city. Luke tells us the whole multitude of the disciples began shouting out, praising God, giving thanks for Jesus. They cried, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

You have to remember that no one, and I mean no one, in that ancient world was allowed to be called "lord" except Caesar who claimed that title for himself. It was a serious offence and some of the Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees, were getting nervous. They called out to Jesus, "Tell them to be quiet!" We don't know if they were afraid for Jesus and for themselves if the Romans caught wind of what was happening. But Jesus didn't care. He told them that even if the disciples were to shut up God's message would be shouted by the stones.

It makes me wonder if he was just talking about the small stones that lined the road- he kind you could pick up in one hand or maybe he was referring to the immense stones that formed the Temple walls. As Jesus's little parade came to a turn in the road the whole vista of Jerusalem spread out before him and he began to weep. He wept for the people who kept their eyes closed to God's presence among them. He gave a warning about the future when their enemies would overrun the city and not one of those enormous stones would be left standing.

Once he got into the city, maybe Jesus would keep a low profile. Maybe he would just fly under the radar for a day or two, you know, just to check things out. But what is the first thing he did? He went right into the Temple and ran out those who cheated the faithful. So much for a low profile. And every day after that he went back into the temple and taught. The people were spellbound by him. The religious and government leaders wanted to kill him.

This is an unusual day because we know that the celebration and cries of joy today will lead to death and tears of sorrow on Friday. The week ahead is one of confusion and chaos but it will culminate in resurrection and redemption. Can't we just skip from today right to next Sunday-when we celebrate Jesus' resurrection? Do we really need to witness the despair of betrayal and the horror of the cross?

Yes, I think we do.

Walking with Jesus through this coming week gives us a clearer picture of who he is. And even more importantly, it shows us who he isn't. This week culminates with a clash of rulers. Caesar's reign is based on domination and ruthless power. The reign of God made visible in Jesus is based on mercy, justice, and the love of God.

Jesus didn't come to make us happy. He came to make us whole. He came to heal our relationships with God, with each other, and within ourselves. In doing so he subverted all of the expectations of the religious and secular world of his time- and ours.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians he knew they were dealing with some problems. Tensions both within the faith community and from the outside were hurting the church. Paul didn't scold his friends he just reminded them who Jesus was and what he did. He includes a very well-known hymn and by doing so reminds the Christians in Philippi of who created and defines their life together.

He writes, *"Think of yourselves the way Christ thought of himself.*

*who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,*

*so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God.*

Paul knew that when Christians forget the central focus of our faith, we begin to think it is all about us. He wants the Philippians to remember --- and in

remembering--- to heal their conflicts and treat one another with respect and love. He reminded them that the pattern for their thinking and living is grounded in the way of Jesus which calls for community unity and individual humility. We don't know exactly what was going on within that faith community but Paul seems to be focusing a lot on how they are treating each other. He told them to stop patterning their lives on the Roman culture that surrounded them- a culture that honored those at the top and denigrated those at the bottom. In that time you couldn't get any lower on the bottom of the ladder than by being crucified.

Death by crucifixion was the worst that could happen to anyone. It inflicted excruciating pain and led to a slow and cruel death. But even more important was that it was done publicly so that everyone could see your humiliation and mock you as you died. Like everything else he did, Jesus showed, through his crucifixion the extreme humility of his humanity.

The "Christ hymn" Paul includes makes the astonishing claim that the one we call God is most fully revealed in the crucified one. *The one who humbled himself and took the form of a slave shows us who God is and how God acts. God's essential character is shown to be one of self-emptying love rather than self-aggrandizement or grasping for power and glory. God's high exaltation of Jesus confirms the divine nature of his mission and ensures that one day he will be acknowledged by all for who he truly is, Jesus, the one who saves, God's anointed one, Lord of all.* (Elisabeth Johnson)

Our Healing Racism book study groups are discussing Drew Hart's book, TROUBLE I'VE SEEN: CHANGING THE WAY THE CHURCH VIEWS RACISM. Drew shares his personal stories of growing up as a young black man in a white dominated world. He was one of only a few African American students at Messiah College, a small Christian college in central Pennsylvania. Although he thought he would be welcomed and accepted by his fellow Christians what he found was both subtle and blatant racism. He calls that time one of the most life-draining experiences of his life. It was during his college years though that he found hope in his biblical studies classes. *It was there that he met the subversive Jesus, the one who identified with and stood in solidarity with vulnerable women, ethnic Samaritan outcasts, the poor, and the systemically excluded and oppressed.* (1)

And it changed his life.

Drew grew up in the church. His father and grandfather were pastors. But through his biblical studies he writes, *"I discovered that the gospel is much more comprehensive, subversive, dangerous, and even undermining of everything that I knew and took for granted in life."* (pg. 57)

Instead of being frightened by this new revelation and shutting it down, he dove right in and learned all he could about this radical Jesus. He thinks that this Jesus is the answer to the racism crisis in our world today. He writes, *"Racial hierarchy didn't exist in Jesus' day, but he navigated a society built upon other forms of hierarchical power, particularly as it related to ethnicity, gender, class, and other realities that intersected with Roman imperial occupation and the religious political establishment in Jerusalem. Jesus was always concerned with how society left vulnerable people as stigmatized social outcasts. Jesus subverted these hierarchical forces and categories that dehumanized people as though they were lower on a human ladder of value and worth."* (pp. 59-60)

Drew reminds us of the kind of life Jesus lived. It was *"grassroots and subversive, traveling from town to town with his improper and scandalous crew. Jesus' ministry was disruptive to the social order and therefore a direct threat to the social, political, religious, and economic establishment. His life and ministry undermined the powers, yet without ever swinging a sword."* (p. 63)

"Jesus understood his revolutionary ministry to be on the border where God's disruptive kingdom and the old social order of domination collide." (p. 65)

Jesus defiantly dared to tell the truth to the Roman rulers about their role in a blasphemous empire that claimed to be a savior to the world to justify its conquests and military expansion.

Drew contends that *"Jesus has started a kingdom rebellion in which his citizens love their enemies, redistribute their resources justly, forgive one another, treat the poor with dignity, live in solidarity with the vulnerable,*

and liberate the oppressed, all because they worship and praise the God revealed in Jesus Christ." (pg. 68)

One thing we know for sure about Jesus is that he brought people together. Will Willimon writes, *"Jesus Christ is, as Paul says, the true 'form of God.' We look at Jesus and see God's true nature- that is to bring people together in his name. And we also see our assignment- to bring people together, divided by so many different political, and social, and gender points of view to do something different, congregating by something more significant than our sameness. We have come from many different places and differing locations, but we are all attempting to walk in the same direction- toward the one Savior who has come toward us.*

Paul encourages the church to focus upon our originating cause, our great mission- to allow Jesus Christ to gather us, to overcome our boundaries and divisions and to be one in Jesus Christ. In other words, to show the world what Jesus can do."

Drew Hart reminds us that Jesus is the clearest image we have of God and Jesus' life is a life of transformation and peacemaking while caring for the most vulnerable in society.

So I wonder, how in the world have we gone from the subversive Jesus who rode boldly into Jerusalem to claim the city for God at the cost of his life --- to the wishy-washy Jesus of the prosperity and political gospel whose only priority is that we get wealthy and don't ruffle any feathers.

Why has the Church worked so hard to tame the wild and radical Jesus of the Gospels? What are we afraid of?

I think the Church is afraid of what will be expected of us if we truly follow the subversive, world-upending, empire- challenging Son of God.

Followers of Jesus are called to question the dominant culture- not acquiesce to it.

We are called to defy Rome and call out our blessings to the One who rides past us on a young horse.

We are called to follow the One who will lead us to places we never wanted to go.

This day, Palm Sunday, is not about a happy parade, it is about the beginning of the end of the old age.

For Jesus and for us, this week is not the beginning of the end- it is the beginning of forever.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

End Notes:

- TROUBLE I'VE SEEN: CHANGING THE WAY THE CHURCH BIEWS RACISM, Drew G.I Hart, Herald Press. 2016. P. 41