

**The First Presbyterian Church in Germantown
Sermon Preached
on
March 28, 2010
Palm Sunday
by
Nancy E. Muth**

Will You Lay Down Your Life For Me?

Luke 19:28-38
John 15:12-17

After a long life of unselfish service, the local Catholic priest, Father John O'Malley, died and went to heaven. St. Peter met him at the gate and said: "John, you did such a wonderful job for us on earth, we'd like to do something special for you. You name it, it's yours." Father O'Malley thought for a moment and said: "I'd like a private audience with the Holy Mother, the Virgin Mary." St. Peter told him it would be arranged. On the appointed day, St. Peter escorted Father O'Malley to the Holy Mother's sanctuary. The priest knelt down before her and said: "Holy Mother, I've always looked to You for guidance, and You have granted me peace and serenity through some difficult times. But I have one question that has nagged me during my whole time on earth. In all the paintings that were done of you, and in all the sculptures that were carved of you, you always looked so sad. Why is that?" Mary thought for a moment, and then said: "I always wanted a girl."

"I always wanted a girl." Of course this is a joke and I tell it because it is like what those in Jerusalem must have been saying following that Palm Sunday parade that we have described in our first scripture lesson that Christopher read for us. They were not saying, "I always wanted a girl" but they were saying, "I always wanted a king," and they were sorely disappointed when instead they found out that Jesus was not the kind of king they had hoped for.

Our story is one that Christians all over the world will be listening to today. It begins just outside of Jerusalem and during the time of Passover, more than 2,000 years ago. Jesus mounts a donkey, just as the Old Testament prophet Zechariah had foretold hundreds of years earlier when he said, "Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and sitting on a donkey."

Jesus rode that donkey to Jerusalem where I have read of estimates of nearly one to two and a half million people had come for the Passover festival. Word had spread that Jesus would be entering the city that day, and so large numbers of people began to gather. Most assuredly there were many in the crowd who knew or knew of Jesus, those who followed him, those who had heard him preach, those who had seen him perform miracles, those whose lives had been touched by his and those who have

heard of these stories for word traveled fast about this great teacher and miracle worker.

As Jesus passed through the city gates and entered Jerusalem, a great shout went up from the people: "Hosanna! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

As they shouted, they waved palm branches and lined his parade route with their coats. Visions of the prophets danced in their eyes. Messianic hopes pounded within their hearts. Jesus, riding at the head of the parade, commanded the attention of everyone in the crowd. Hail to the king!

But something was not right. Where was the royal purple? Why did the religious authorities not bow down and worship him? In spite of Zechariah's prophecy, why was Jesus riding a donkey? Why were the Roman soldiers not afraid? Wasn't this to be their long awaited messiah, their military and political leader?

After all the screaming and shouting and palm waving, had anything really changed? Something was not quite right. It was like the story of Mary admitting to the Catholic priest, "I always wanted a girl." Well, these people always wanted a king who would save them from the tyranny of the Romans who ruled them. There was great disappointment among the people for they wanted a political liberator, not a humble man riding a donkey.

That day in Jerusalem which we now refer to as Palm Sunday began with great fanfare and celebration, just as we began this service of worship, waving palm branches and singing with gusto, "All Glory Laud and Honor," but things changed quickly. It did not take long for people to realize that this one who they had come to elevate to power was not about political revolution but spiritual renewal.

In the days that followed, Jesus made it quite clear that his agenda was not about riots, but righteous living. He wasn't interested in setting up a temporal kingdom but introducing an eternal kingdom. And the people were disappointed. Even his disciples were disappointed as they did not yet understand who he really was.

The gospel of John spends five chapters telling of what happened on the Thursday night of that week, as he gathered with his disciples in an upper room for the Passover meal. This was to be his last time with them and Jesus had lots to teach them before he left. They still were not getting it. In the 13th chapter of John, Jesus tells them, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. Where I am going, you cannot come." And Simon Peter questions him, "Lord, where are you going? Why cannot I not follow you? I will lay down my life for you." And Jesus turns back to him asking, "Will you lay down your life for me?"

That is our question from Jesus for this day, this Palm Sunday when it is so easy to lay down palm branches, but our lives?. This is a question Jesus asks us just as he asks Simon Peter. "Will you lay down your life for me?" Are we ready and willing to give up the ultimate sacrifice for Jesus?

The story is told of a Little League baseball game. It was the bottom of the ninth inning and there was one out and someone on first base. A young boy went to take his turn at bat and as he walked up to the plate he looked over to the coach, and he saw him give the signal to sacrifice bunt. The boy then promptly proceeded to take big swings at the first three pitches and strike out. The coach ran up to him and said, "Didn't you see me give you the signal to sacrifice?" "Yes," the boy replied, "but I didn't really think that you meant it."

Isn't that what we so often say to God? "Yes, Lord, I heard that talk about sacrifice but I didn't really think that you meant it." "Sure, I heard you talk about giving all we have away, about turning the other cheek, about loving our neighbor as ourselves, about risking our lives for the sake of the gospel but I didn't really think you meant for me to do it?" But he did mean it and he showed us how much he meant it when he went to the cross and offered the greatest sacrifice when he was willing to lay down his life for his friends . . . for us!

Matthew read to us a portion of the gospel writer John's account of what Jesus taught to his disciples in the upper room that night and teaches to us in this sanctuary this morning. Listen to what he says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Remember again that question he had just asked Simon Peter and us: "Will you lay down your life for me?" Is Jesus our friend? Do we love him enough to lay down our lives for him? Or are we just like those fickle friends of Jesus who waved palms at him and cheered him on Palm Sunday, but turned their backs on him later because he was not what they expected? That is exactly what we do when we come here on Palm Sunday and don't return until Easter Sunday. We turn our backs on Jesus when he asks us to come with him to the upper room on Thursday night and hear his commands to us, when we don't walk with him to the cross on Good Friday and feel the anguish of his suffering on our behalf. Instead we would rather move right from waving palms to cheering for the tomb being empty.

Jesus calls us his friends? Are we? Listen to some of these definitions of a friend: "One who multiplies joys, divides grief, and whose honesty is absolute." "One who understands our silence." "A friend is the one who comes in when the whole world has gone out."

Are you a friend of Jesus . . . of this one who will stand by you no matter how unworthy you are . . . who loves you, encourages you, strengthens you and comforts you? Are you his friend? Jesus tells us in this same passage that we are indeed his

friends if we do what he commands. And he commands us to love one another as he has loved us. No small order! This is a risky relationship. When we accept this relationship it challenges us to love others in the same way that Jesus loves.

Not too long before she died, Mother Teresa spoke at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. She was introduced to that gathering as "the greatest woman in the world." But when she stood up to speak she completely dismissed that introduction by saying that if she were the greatest woman in the world, you'd think that God would've made her tall enough to see over the podium behind which she was standing. And then she went on to say, "I am nothing close to being the greatest woman in the world, but I will tell you the greatest thing about my life. I've been able to be a tiny pencil in the hand of God, someone through whom God writes love letters to the world."

When we truly accept the role of being a friend of Jesus Christ, we too we see ourselves as a tiny pencils through which God can write love letters to the world.

And so it is that Jesus asks us: "Will you lay down your life for me?"

Anne Lamont tells a story in her book "Bird by Bird" about an eight year old boy with a younger sister who was dying of leukemia and who needed a blood transfusion in order to live. The parents asked the boy if they could have his blood tested. He agreed, and it was discovered that his blood and his sister's blood matched. When asked if he would donate his blood to his sister, the boy said he would have to think about it overnight.

The next morning the boy told his parents that he was willing to give his blood to his sister. In the hospital the boy was put in a bed next to his sister, and both children were hooked up to IVs. After the nurse took a pint of blood from the boy and put it into the girl's IV, the boy lay there in silence, watching his blood drip into his sister. She became much better, and later that morning, when the doctor came in to see how the children were doing, the boy opened his eyes and asked, "How soon now until I die?"

What love! Jesus asks us to have that kind of love for him and for one another when he asks: "Will you lay down your life for me?" However, we, like that young boy, need not think of it in terms of laying down our physical lives but laying down our way of living so that we live the lives Jesus calls for us and needs for us to live.

"Will you lay down your life for me?" This is a commitment question. How committed are you to being a friend of Jesus . . . being his disciple . . . being a Christian? What a wonderful question for us to consider during this Holy Week. . . . You see, we can't simply jump from Palm Sunday and cheering for Jesus to Easter and shouting together "He is risen! He is risen indeed!" We need to understand what it means and what it asks of us to give praise to this risen and triumphant one.

If you have seen the play or movie, "Jesus Christ, Superstar," you might remember the song that the crowd sings on Palm Sunday. The words say: "Christ, you know I love you. Did you see, I waved?" These words can be our words as well. "Christ, you know I love you. Look, here I am in church. I'm putting money in the offering plate. Did you see me wave my palm this morning?" But just like those in the Jerusalem crowd, we can change our tune quickly, can't we?

It is easy to come to church, to give a little money, to wave a palm branch but oh how much harder it is to love one another, to turn the other cheek, to give up ones life.

Palm Sunday is a time to remind us of the need to make a choice, to make a decision about Jesus Christ. Are we for him or against him? Will we accept him or reject him? Are we ready to die to ourselves and be filled with the new life that we are called to live as we give ourselves away in humble obedience . . . in sacrificial giving . . . in loving service . . . just like Jesus did?

Jesus is commanding us to love one another as he loved us. He isn't talking about an emotion. True love is much more than an emotion. Love is a way of life. . . . Love combines attitudes and actions . . . commitment and conduct. We are to love one another as Christ loved us.

The love Jesus is talking about requires a choice on our part . . . a decision. It requires a decision to humble ourselves. It requires a decision to give up our own self-interests. It requires a decision to let go of our own agendas. It requires a decision to stay faithful, even in the face of pain. It requires a decision to give of ourselves, even when we don't feel like it. This is the kind of love Jesus had for us, and it's the kind of love Jesus commands us to have for one another.

Will you lay down your life for me?

On this Palm Sunday, as we begin to enter into Holy Week, I ask us to remember the story of Mother Teresa and be willing to dedicate ourselves to being tiny pencils in the hand of God, through whom God writes love letters to the world.

Let me conclude by telling you about longest sermon that was ever preached. Do you know how long it was? According to the Guinness Book of World Records the longest sermon ever preached lasted for 60 hours and 31 minutes, and was given not by a Presbyterian, but by a Unitarian preacher. Some of you think my sermons are long, well imagine one that goes on for 60 and one half hours!

There is another world record for a sermon, the record for shortest sermon ever preached. This one was not by a Presbyterian either, but by an Episcopalian priest, who simply spoke one word: "Love," and sat down. That was it. No more. I'm sure for a variety of reasons, church members said it was the best sermon he ever gave.

It took me longer than one word, and it took Jesus longer than one word, but the essence of the message is the same: "Love!"

We are to love as Christ loves.

"Will you lay down your life for me?" "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

"Will you lay down your life for me?" Jesus laid down his life for us, and to that I say, "Thanks be to God!" Amen.