

CUMC Sermon March 28 Palm Sunday

Mark 11:1-11

Love is the Way:

Jesus vs. Caesar--Whose God are We Serving?

Well, let's begin with a great story about John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement in England. Actually, Wesley was a very controversial clergyperson in the Anglican Church. Church doors were often closed to him because he stirred things up with his working-class talk about coal miners facing dangerous conditions, poor people sent to prison, children used as factory workers, and slaves bought and sold without regard for their humanity. To John Wesley, the gospel of Jesus Christ stood in stark contrast to many practices of the industrial revolution.

Even Wesley's hometown of Epworth turned against him. One Sunday evening in 1742, when he found himself locked out of the sanctuary, Wesley walked to the church cemetery and stood on the flat top of his father's tomb. A huge crowd had gathered, many people walking miles to hear him preach. In fact there were so many people, Wesley decided to stay for a week, lodging at the local inn, and preaching every evening right in the market square. When asked why, this mighty Methodist said "The world is my parish!"

2. Well, today, this Sunday, this joyous Palm Sunday, we look back beyond the founder of our denomination, to the founder of our faith. We look way back to remember the mass movement of people following Jesus of Nazareth. Crowds often gathered in the countryside around Jesus, where he did most of his teaching, healing and food pop-ups.

But for the annual Passover celebration, Jesus and his followers had to walk 90 miles--a 4 day trip-- from the Galilean hills to the hustle/bustle of Jerusalem, the City of Peace. For Passover, thousands of Jews from all over the Mediterranean region poured into Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the Temple, recalling their liberation from slavery in Egypt. But here's the tricky part. Not only did they remember the past, they also anticipated a future when they could live out from under the boots of the occupying Roman army. The soldiers' job was to enforce the peace and make sure taxes flowed abundantly into the coffers of the Empire.

That's why Passover was such a big deal for the ruler of the region, Herod Antipas. With the big celebration of Passover, King Herod moved his whole entourage from his coastal palace to the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem, just north-west of the Temple Mount. From this vantage point, Herod's military general, Pontius Pilate, could keep an eye on what was happening in the large Temple courtyards below.

So from a historical perspective, there were actually two parades going on in Jerusalem for the Passover. The gospel of Mark tells us about one of them--the "Jesus-Parade" coming in from the east, down the Mount of Olives and up through the Gate of Mercy.

But from the northwest came the "Imperial Parade"--Herod's entourage surrounded by armored soldiers, chariots, flag bearers and trumpeters. Herod and Pilate rode large white stallions, Herod dressed in the flowing regalia of Rome, and

Pilate suited up in full battle armour. They had to make a show of it, and demonstrate what would happen if anyone stepped out of line. Quite a powerful spectacle!

Now Jesus' parade was of an entirely different impact. His was staged as a people's parade -- like street theater, full of enthusiasm and mockery and symbolic acts. Jesus rode into the city seated on a young, wobbly-kneed colt, or perhaps the foal of a donkey (The gospels have different versions of this story!). Along the streets, crowds cheered him on, throwing their cloaks on the ground, as if the Nazarene woodworker was royalty. They shouted, "Hosanna! Hosanna!" meaning "Save us! Save us!" which is rather funny thinking about it--this one? The one on the colt? The one without battle armour and weapons? This one come in the name of God? How could he be the one the prophets called the Prince of Peace?

Sure--when we look back, on the two Passover parades, Caesar's man Herod or Jesus the Nazarene? Whose kingdom substantiated the true power--the Kingdom of Rome or the kingdom of God?

3. Well, maybe we need to pause for a moment. Let's take a pause. It's kind of hard looking back in time, as we already know, we know how the gospel writers tell the story. We know which of the parades ultimately won out. With Rome, all that's left is the Coliseum, ancient aqueducts, lots of toppled columns and monuments. For the Jesus-movement, there's congregations of followers in nearly every country in the world today, from small one room churches to vast campuses of megachurches. We certainly know who won out, which kingdom ruled the day. Hmmmmm Or do we?

When we look around now, out in our world, it seems like the parade of power and wealth was the one that succeeded, continues to succeed relentlessly. We can point to certain world leaders in other countries who exercise power in ruthless ways ...Vladimir Putin in Russia, Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, or Ali Khamenei in Iran. Dictators can also be very, very, wealthy men. But here in our own country, power and wealth have long been the American Dream.

We can even see this clearly as we've come to a crossroads over the last year. What we've seen laid bare by the pandemic is in fact how many people live month to month, week to week, even day to day in terms of survival. We've come to understand how so many of us are considered "essential workers" or "vulnerable workers" whose lives have been at risk to keep the economy going. Even people who own their own businesses have been at risk as we've seen livelihoods collapse in the lockdowns, as necessary as they have been for public health.

But during this time, billionaires as a class have added about \$1 trillion to their total net worth since the pandemic began. Roughly one-fifth of that increase flowed into the pockets of just two men: Jeff Bezos, chief executive of Amazon, and E-Ion Musk, owner of Tesla. In looking at power and wealth, we need to ask what does it mean that we've so clearly seen wealth flow upwards, when so many are down? "What does it mean, for instance, that two men amassed enough wealth this year to end all hunger in America eight times over (with the estimated price tag of \$25billion), or that the \$200 billion accumulated by Bezos and Musk is greater than the amount of coronavirus relief allocated to state and local governments in the CARES Act?"

Of course, this is wealth on paper and writing a check no matter how big doesn't solve a problem overnight. But the more clear the wealth gap becomes to us, this does help us to frame a question about our priorities as a nation:

Should the "American Dream be the aspiration to become a multi-millionaire or billionaire... or should the American Dream be collectively building a society where nobody starves or goes homeless and everybody is treated equally, fully insured and paid a living wage?"

The pandemic has been horrible for our nation, we may be more vulnerable than we've ever been. But in reflection on this last year, we can see more clearly that the parade of power and wealth has continued. So there wasn't a decisive winner on Palm Sunday, the two parades have marched along throughout history, and we have to decide, even today, whose parade we will follow.

4. So where does this dilemma leave us today? Hmmmm Maybe we need a second opinion. Yes, we need a second opinion about who is worth following and what is worth placing our trust in. Should we give up on the "kingdom" of God? Or what many progressive Christian movements now translate more descriptively, the "kin-dom of God," the "Beloved Community." Yes, we need someone who knows about hardship and struggle, loss and vulnerability. Some who can give witness to continuing to choose love.

This week our adult study groups are finishing up Bishop Michael Curry's book, *Love is the Way*. Within the Anglican Church, he remains a controversial leader, having been censored in the past for his stance on LGBTQ inclusion in the US. But he never walked away from the table, he pledged to walk in love even as he stood for racial justice, indigenous rights and environmental sustainability too. As Bishop Curry says, "The way of love is a commitment to seeking the good and well-being of others...If we all made the commitment to loving beyond our nationality, our ethnicity, our politics, our religion or any other difference--we and the earth itself would be blessed."

Bishop Curry has been a trustworthy guide. At the close of his book, he sums up his wisdom:

"When God, who is love, becomes our spiritual center of gravity, and love our moral compass, we live differently, regardless of what the world around us does.

So don't give up on love.

Listen to it.

Trust it.

Give into it.

Obey it.

Love can help and heal when nothing else can." (248)

This past week we heard other witnesses testify to love:

A group of 9th grade girls in NJ decided they wanted to respond to people's needs in the pandemic. They created a group called "Save Our State" and scoured internet sites and social media to find where vaccine appointments could be found. Then they signed up elders they knew--including their mayor-- who were having difficulties navigating the technology or staying on the long phone lines. The group

signed up over 600 state residents. As 15 year old Elizabeth Decker remarked, “The feeling you get when you get that appointment is one that is unmatched!”

Trust a bishop? Trust a 15 year old? Both of them testify that love is the way.

Closing:

So this Palm Sunday, we Methodists stand in a long tradition of love as we seek the wellbeing and human dignity of others. In the season of Lent, we are invited to recommit ourselves to following Jesus, even as his way stands in contrast to the parades of power and wealth in our world. May God’s Spirit turn our hearts around, as we too cry Hosanna, Hosanna...

Sermon Resources:

1. Title of sermon based on Joerg Rieger, *Jesus vs. Caesar: For People Tired of Serving the Wrong God* (2018).
2. https://britishheritage.com/history/home-wesleys-epworth?fbclid=IwAR1yesaEZQOAtHDIwf_68Cj0v-ynpQbm-AJHMCozh4mJ-__LoJe1XaHS0to
3. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/01/01/bezos-musk-wealth-pandemic/>
4. Adam Best, Instagram post.
5. Bishop Michael Curry, *Love is the Way*, p. 242.
6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bk-BPKzMoVg>