

April 12, 2019 FCCS
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“Palm Sunday, The Gift of Paradox”

Today we are exploring the gift of paradox. I'm not gonna lie, Palm Sunday is traditionally my least favorite Sunday in the Christian calendar. I just need to own that; I will go to great lengths not to have to preach Palm Sunday. My former interns will tell you- they always had to preach Palm Sunday. Two years ago, I managed to time the stomach flu perfectly, so that Alan Kelchner had to preach.

The Palm Sunday modern day Christianity has inherited is a complex animal. Many of you remember as children growing up learning how to make palm crosses, how many of you still have one someone in your home? A little later, out on the path to General Vallejo's House the Catholic Church will process in a Palm Sunday parade, singing Hosanna and waving palm fronds. It is an exciting time and those palm crosses ultimately become the ashes used in next year's Ash Wednesday service. They mark the tangibility of our own mortality and the theatrical part of me loves that subversive imagery, the joy turning to tears and ultimately to triumph.

However, in the progressive Protestant tradition, we are not real big on Holy Week. So Palm Sunday is not only the day we wave the Palms, it is also the day we have to come to terms with imminent crucifixion of Jesus. We do not linger long on the Hosannas. Oh sure, we will have a Maundy Thursday service, but only about thirty people will come, so for most of us this is it before Easter. Palm waving and crucifixion in twelve minutes or less. Talk about a paradox.

Let's back up a bit, what exactly is a paradox?

It is a statement that may seem absurd or contradictory yet can be true. Paradoxes often contradict commonly held beliefs. They cause us to move past the surface to a deeper understanding.

It is easier to explain a paradox is by giving examples. Take the statement "Less is more." This statement uses two opposite words that contradict one another. How can less be more? The concept behind this statement is that what is less complicated is often more appreciated.

How about a few more:

- You have to spend money to make money.
- The longer, I live the less I know.
- Deep down, you're really shallow.

How about these from our text today; Luke 19

- “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.”
- “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Palm Sunday itself is a great paradox. We witness people shouting with loud hosannas- those are the same people who moments from now will be calling for Jesus’ death. We also know, that in this story, the end is just the beginning. And even though this event is thought to have happened more than 2000 years ago, we know we are in fact those very people. Our lives paradoxical. How often do we believe one thing and do another?

That’s what Parker Palmer refers to as the tragic gap. The distance between who we mean to be and who we are. Palm Sunday is an invitation to mind that gap.

Thomas Merton one of the great spiritual masters of our time started off his lessons to the earnest and pious would be monks in his care by saying, “Men, before you can have a spiritual life, you’ve got to have a life!”

The point is that we find our spiritual lives among the rubble, the chaos, the remnant. We discover who we truly are in the midst of this beautiful mess that is life. “The promise of paradox,” writes Parker Palmer in his book by the same name “is the promise that apparent opposites-like order and disorder- can cohere in our lives, the promise that is when we replace either-or with both-and, our lives will become larger and more filled with light. It is a promise at the heart of every wisdom tradition.”

It is certainly true of the Christian tradition, how else could we grok the notion that “If you seek your life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life, you will find it”? Or “The last shall be first and the first shall be last”? Or the notion that Christ was fully human and fully divine? Or the idea that we know there is a God, but we cannot claim to know the God that is?

This is the promise of Paradox! And we wonder why thoughtful, mature spirituality is not easily packageable or easily deliverable. Why we can’t just

show up every now and again and demand depth. Because paradox is messy, it takes time to unfold and unpack- its meaning is fluid.

Here is the big one- how is it that the majority of Americans do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and yet come next Sunday, our churches will be packed to the rafters with the Halleluiah Chorus?

Because whether we can articulate it or not, we know what it is to suspend disbelief in an effort to embrace paradox. It's the air we breathe, the lives we live, and the faith we follow.

This year, how about we make a choice to linger in the Hosannas a bit longer. Sure, we know where this story is headed. We know that the only way to the Promised land is through the wilderness, and that there can be no resurrection without first experiencing the loss of death.

Yet as people of the Way, can't we also make a chose to fully inhabit the gap between the already and the not yet. To celebrate the bloom of wildflowers as the madness of injustice swirls about us. Can't we, as followers of Jesus, insist on joy alongside the suffering that we know is real?

In truth most of our lives are lived here; in the honesty of paradox and the determination of **anyway**. We know we are dying, yet we choose to live. We know the world around us is not as God would have it be, yet we choose to inhabit it as fully as we can. We know that we will suffer losses of the cruelest kind, yet we embrace love with our whole hearts **anyway**.

This is the gift of paradox; paradox is the gift of faith- not a life of either or but a life of yes and... So, let us wave the palms of joy that are ours to wave. Let us hold onto our Hosanna's just a little bit longer, for surely, we know darkness is on the horizon. Yet the greatest paradox of all is that in every setting sun there is the promise that it will indeed rise again.

Amen and Amen