

The Paradox of Palm Sunday – Brian Hartley

Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29; Luke 19:28-40

Carl Krebsbach really had no intention of drawing attention to himself on that beautiful fall day in downtown Lake Wobegon. He was just trying to help out his mom and dad, Myrtle and Florian, who had complained of a problem in the yard requiring an emergency call. Being a good and faithful son, he had reported early that morning to try and discover the reason why the toilet had overflowed. And, as Garrison Keillor tells the story, the result is one of his most classic narratives, a monologue entitled simply, “Homecoming.”

You see, what Carl discovered that day was that his parents had been using an old 1937 Chevy coupe as a septic tank for some three decades and it had finally reached its full capacity. And, being as he was a good son, he was determined to rectify the problem. However, he had not counted on meeting up with the Homecoming parade in town when he tried to surreptitiously sneak the septic remains off to the dump. Nor had he counted on coming face-to-face with his daughter, Carla, as the Homecoming queen seated directly in front of him on her prized perch atop a Sherman tank and accompanied by a squad from the Fighting 308th armory up in Freeport. Suffice it to say, that the event was to remain for her a rather ignominious remembrance of her backwater parentage while to the rest of the town it was to become the most memorable Homecoming parade ever—especially when it took the better part of a half hour to turn the Krebsbach tractor around, all the while emitting the most odiferous stench while splattering its contents all over the downtown square.

Karla, like the disciples in today’s gospel lesson, had made the mistake of thinking that her selection as Homecoming queen was surely going to be the beginning of the trajectory of her life towards bigger and better things. She had made her way successfully through four years of high school, just like they had managed to weather some three years or so of life on the road with Jesus. And just as Carla sat up tall and magnificent atop that Sherman tank replete with tiara and the queenly wave, those disciples must have stood atop the Mount of Olives just outside of Jerusalem and walked upright as they came into the city proper while folks spread their cloaks. Everything in today’s scripture points towards Jesus as the fulfillment of all of their hopes and dreams—part of the Messianic script of his people as recorded in the prophet Zechariah.

But, the fact is that we simply cannot hear today’s passage read without also hearing in the back of our minds, as Paul Harvey used to say, “the rest of the story.” We always hear this story as “insiders,” as those privy to all that will yet take place during the Passion Week. We know that Jesus’ moment of glory is going to be short-lived, that the disciples who here proclaim so loudly, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” will shortly desert him and Peter, their leader, will even say, “I do not know him.” In short, we simply cannot think of Palm Sunday without thinking ahead to Good Friday.

Today's story, taken by itself, is clearly a story of joy and gladness. But it takes place in a much larger context of despair and sadness. And, as such, it sounds a bit like the writer of Qoheleth when he says that "to everything there is a season," reminding us that life is made up of both laughter and sorrow. I want to suggest that today's scripture lessons are something like the gospel in miniature, proclaiming that following Jesus is an invitation to both life and death. For the Christian, especially those who embrace the truth of this coming week and its remembered events, we can never forget that all of life is to be lived in the shadow of the cross.

If this is the case, if we are inextricably called to embrace this great paradox, in the words of Francis Schaeffer, how shall we then live? If Jesus is to be our model, the one to whom we seek to conform our lives, what are we called to be and to do? Perhaps nowhere is that question answered so significantly nor more poetically than in the words of the hymn Paul uses in response to the generosity bestowed upon him by those early Christians in Philippi. As my good friend and Pauline scholar, Dr. Michael Gorman says, "No passage in Paul, and perhaps no passage in the entire Bible, has received more scholarly attention" than today's epistolary lesson. And it is here, perhaps more than in any single passage, that we are given at least a glimpse into how to embrace a life that includes the paradox of both Palm Sunday and Good Friday.

These familiar verses have a clear two-fold sweep: first, following the model of our Lord, they begin in the heights of the godhead and move, through acts of self-emptying, towards humility and death. But then, the subject switches from the Son to the Father and we move from shameful death on a cross to heavenly exaltation. I have oftentimes compared the movement of the hymn to the experience of listening to Bach's "Tocatta and Fugue in D-minor." The power of the message lies not in one particular musical format but, rather, in the power of bringing the two together at the same time to allow us to live, dwell, and experience the tension that exists between the two—this is the very nature of paradox.

In his Beecher Lectures delivered now several decades ago, Frederick Buechner tried to encapsulate this dynamic dilemma in the title of the book he later published, entitled, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. He reminds the reader that the world of the Gospel is a world of darkness and that many of the great scenes take place at night (89). But, it is in the dawn that the gospel narrative breaks open and we discover that Jesus is risen. It is in the meeting of this darkness and light, this fairy tale of the Gospel, that Truth rears its head, once and for all. It is only by learning to live in this tension between Palm Sunday and Good Friday that one can enter into the life of Jesus.

That life, according to the apostle Paul here, is characterized more than anything else by humility and self-emptying. Henri Nouwen reminds that "humility is the real Christian virtue. It means staying close to the ground (humus), to people, to everyday life, with what is happening with all its down-to-earthness. It is the virtue that opens our eyes for the presence of God on the earth and allows us to live grateful lives." I was fortunate in my early years to grow up around humble folk—people who worked hard by the sweat of their brow and who acquired dirt

under their fingernails. They saw such a way of life not as demeaning but as ennobling. To see such people down on their knees in prayer and to hear them whispering your name to the Lord of all Creation has a strangely invigorating effect on how one lives one's life.

And yet, one slips so easily in line with the disciples in today's gospel lesson. For, if you look closely, you will see that what sets apart Luke's telling of this familiar story is that it is not primarily the people who are responding to Jesus, but his disciples. And they are insistent upon giving him all of the trappings of royalty—from singing his praises outside the city gates to providing their cloaks for him to ride upon. They sing his praises, we are told, because of his "deeds of power that they had seen." That is, they have been impressed mostly by the way he had brought healing and restoration to others.

But the message of Holy Week is not one of "deeds with power." Instead, the dominant verb that will come to be repeated throughout this coming week's liturgy is that of "being handed over"—a passive, rather than an active, movement. Throughout Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion, he never really becomes the primary actor but, instead, is portrayed as the one acted upon. Picking up on the words of today's Old Testament lesson, he becomes the one whose back is struck, whose face bears both insults and spitting. His body literally becomes that which is beaten, battered, and broken. By the time he is taken down from the cross, much of his body's fluids have already been drained from his dehydrated and defaced corpse. Bloated, swollen, cut and tortured, those who knew him best may no longer have even been able to recognize him. It is into this mystery that we dare to walk and to dwell over the next few days. Today, we wave palm branches but in a matter of a few days we will join with those who yelled, "Crucify him!"

I have thought often this past week, given this upcoming context, of the shortness of life. It seems just yesterday that I was the age of some of our own high schoolers here today and living a life of misery in a backwater town in eastern Oklahoma. It was one of those places where football is king and if you don't or can't play the game as a young man, you are confined to the dregs of society. I was surrounded each and every day by these demi-gods, some of whom would go on to stellar careers at the collegiate level. One such young man was Steve Davis, the quarterback of the Sallisaw team. In 1973, he would make his first start for the Oklahoma Sooners, beating Baylor the first week and tying the vaunted Southern Cal Trojans the next—despite future pros, Pat Haden and Lynn Swann. After that, he would lead Barry Switzer's team to 28 straight victories. And every time he walked onto the field, 70-80,000 faithful Oklahoma fans would go crazy. But last weekend, the little plane that Steve was on went down in northern Indiana and he died at age 60. The jovial muscle-bound guy who used to walk down the hall as girls swooned is no more.

And then came the call that one of our own young alums, Jaime Sandhaus Rantanen, class of 2007, had died suddenly as the result of a seizure. Jaime and her husband, James, were married right here on this very spot not six years ago. Her parents, Sheryl and Joe, sat just there beaming up at their daughter and her bridegroom. James and Jaime were faithful

parishioners here at St. Paul's and their voices helped carry many of us along when we didn't know the hymns. Jaime was all that we hope for in our students—bright, engaged, and passionate about serving Christ and the church. And that is exactly what she has been doing as a member of the pastoral staff at the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd over in Hazelwood where the children and teens know her by name. But now, she is gone, leaving behind a young widower to make his way through the veil of grief. And he is not alone. This year many of us have lost loved ones—mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, friends who have sustained us, and acquaintances who have inspired us. And the older we get, the more it seems that the obituaries dominate our lives and we are confronted with the reality that life is short and youth quickly fades. In the end, the meaning of our lives together comes down to just one week in the life of the church—the one we call Holy Week.

It is fitting, however, that today we would rejoice. For, ever since Luke 9:51, Jesus has been on his way to Jerusalem and today, at long last, he has come to the end of his extended journey. But, in many ways, his ending is but our beginning, our chance to join him in a life of self-giving, of humiliation, of downward-living. Today offers for us a glimpse not just of the crowds and of the accolades, but of the beginning of the way of the cross. Poor Carla Krebsbach, she thought that everything had come to an end the day her dad sat staring at her atop his tractor with the rusted-out old Chevy coupe leaking behind him. But she forgot that this was Homecoming and that coming home meant not just wearing a tiara on your head but confronting who and whose you are. And on that day, she was reminded of just who she was, just like we are reminded today and this week of just who we are. We are people of the earth, humus-like, who are called to follow the consummate human who redeems and restores all things earthly. So come, join the procession, as we make our way to the cross and discover our true home in and with him. Amen.