

**Sermon: March 20, 2016 – Palm Sunday      Luke 19: 28-40**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

I have to admit that I've always had a bit of a disconnect with Palm Sunday. On the surface it's hard to put my finger on why: it's a memorable story; the Palm branches of Matthew, Mark and John remind me of the place that Jesus lived and died; I've always liked the hymns, more or less; and while I've never been a big "parade" guy, at some level I think the inner child in me loves a parade. And yet there is something about this particular annual festival that does not work for me.

Perhaps it is this: the whole point of Palm Sunday lies in its irony, the fact that the cheering crowd got it wrong... or at least, the ways in which they were right were laughably different from what they figured they were up to. Because of that irony, it's as if there is an intentional disconnect built right in to Palm Sunday which makes it hard for me to picture myself in the crowd that day. Would I pick up a palm branch? *Should* I pick up a palm branch? Would I shout "hosanna" alongside people who thought they were ushering in the new King who would be rugged and powerful and sternly devout like the Israelite Kings of old? Or would I shout "hosanna" with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, knowing that I was cheering for something the rest of the crowd was unaware of, hailing the arrival of a new type of leader who will lead the people to a profound, love-based fairness, rather than the old-school fight for might? With no clear place to stand in this happy crowd, a bit of dislocation is fully understandable.

But when I go a bit deeper, I realize that there is even more to it. At Palm Sunday, I am confronted with something that colours nearly every action I take during a day: **the difference between the things I want, and the things I need.** For at Palm Sunday, people looked at Jesus and they thought they saw what they wanted, but behind the scene the power of God was at work, giving them what they needed.

Today, as we stand at the beginning of Holy Week, I am going to investigate that with you: the difference between what we want and what we need. This division between wants and needs is particularly blurry in our day and age, yet not a new struggle at all. Over 90 years ago, the great Hindu social activist Mahatma Gandhi wrote a simple list that he called the "Seven Social Sins" and for me, these shape the discussion about wants and needs in a way that mirrors the ironic lessons of Palm Sunday. **These seven social sins stated by Gandhi are:**

- Wealth Without Work
- Pleasure Without Conscience
- Knowledge Without Character
- Commerce Without Morality
- Science Without Humanity
- Religion Without Sacrifice
- Politics Without Principle

Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, Arun has added "Rights without responsibilities" as an eighth social sin. While it isn't something his grandfather said, I think he would have addressed it if he were here, for the repeated demand to get my entitled piece of the pie, without contributing anything to that greater common good that Jesus constantly points us towards, is something that our society is going to have to figure out, and soon.

As I look at Gandhi's original list, I see two things. The first thing I see is a clear delineation of wants vs. needs: on the left I see what we want, on the right I see what we need, in order for that item on the left to be practiced in a helpful manner. The second thing I see here is a direct connection to the irony of Palm Sunday, when the crowd deeply desired a leader who would give them stuff from the left hand column, things that could make their lives easier – which was totally understandable, given how little freedom they had. But Jesus was a right-column kind of leader: one who demanded that people and institutions show character, morality, principle and sacrifice. I would be lying if I said I was unconcerned with those things in the left hand column but I can say this: when I am truly paying attention to what the teacher, Jesus said in his preaching, and when I am listening to what the risen Christ reminds me of as I walk through life, I am much more drawn to that right-hand column than the left-hand column as a way of assessing whether or not my life is "measuring up." And in these days when all Churches in the northern hemisphere are struggling for relevance, I think this list uncovers what organized religion can contribute to the discussion these days. If we can enter public discourse as those who are committed to those right-column qualities,

qualities close to the heart of Christ, we will truly be fulfilling our responsibility of bringing the reconciling love of Jesus Christ to a confused and conflicted world.

With that in mind, **a quick tour of the seven social sins.**

In addition to my Scots upbringing that taught me that you don't get something for nothing, the closely-related social sins of **wealth without work** and **commerce without morality** run very close to my core connection to Jesus. After all, if I truly believe that everyone I encounter in life is a child of God, then I how can I possibly desire unmerited accumulation of wealth at someone else's expense?

The late Stephen Covey offered these wise words: "In his book *Moral Sentiment* ... Adam Smith [widely regarded as the 'father of economics'] explained how foundational to the success of our systems is the moral foundation: how we treat each other, the spirit of benevolence, of service, of contribution. If we ignore the moral foundation and allow economic systems to operate without moral foundation and without continued education, we will soon create an amoral, if not immoral, society and business.... To Adam Smith, every business transaction is a moral challenge to see that both parties come out fairly." When I hear words like these, written in the early 1990s about an economist working in the 1770s, it makes me wonder how some boardrooms work in seeming isolation from this deep morality, while at the same time reaffirming my commitment to Christ's insistence that I love my neighbour as myself.

**Pleasure without Conscience** is such a key concept for us to consider, especially in this part of the world. What is the real cost of our recreation? Who pays the price when wildlife corridors are compromised in favour of development? How much travel is too much, when every mile I drive or fly relies on burning fossil fuels? And then there's all the questions we need to ask without even leaving the TV room: why is so much entertainment based on violence? And if it's not violent, why does it need to be demeaning to women? These are difficult yet necessary questions for us to ask ourselves as followers of Christ, who promises a realm where all people will share in the enjoyment of health, wholeness, opportunity and prosperity. Shalom is uplifted when we choose leisure activities that do not rely on the exploitation of any living being; Shalom is stunted when we allow self-satisfaction to overshadow the needs of the planet and those who dwell therein.

Next up is **Knowledge without Character**, which today I'm going to place beside **Science without Humanity**. For my entire life, I have lived in a world capable of destroying itself. I truly believe that without activists like Helen Caldicott in the early 1980s, calling the leaders of the world back from the brink of nuclear annihilation, we would not be here today. We still have that ability, and still need to be hearing those voices of sanity. For as much as I celebrate the contributions of science and technology to the world I live in, they have to be used in a principled manner. Our scientific, medical and technological knowledge give us near God-like power, that the folks walking around with Jesus could never have imagined. And while Jesus never said it out loud, I suspect that he would be the first to say "just because you know how to do something, doesn't mean it's a good thing to do." Knowledge is a wonderful thing, but an accurate moral compass always need to be its travelling companion.

As one who lives within the progressive/liberal end of the Christian spectrum, the language of "**religion without sacrifice**" sounds like language from somebody else's dictionary. And then I remember how deeply moved many of us were, by those scriptures we encountered last fall from the book of James – for example, James 2:14-18, which said "14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18 But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds."

Whether it's the formal, communal activities of religion or the informal, individual expressions of spirituality, discipleship challenges us to give of ourselves, and not just superficially. While the word "sacrifice" is so intertwined with certain understandings of Christ's death on the cross that it might push us away, the notion of sacrificial giving – and speaking up on behalf of the poor and marginalized, even when the cost is high - does bring us closer to the heart of God and the mission of Christ.

And finally... this. I can go most of a day without hearing someone speak of the price of oil, I can go most of a week without hearing anyone lament that none of the NHL teams housed in Canadian cities is likely

to make the playoffs, but I can't go more than an hour without someone mentioning the nastiness of political discourse these days, south of the border and everywhere. While there is no question that Donald Trump has been cheerleading this, it's not all about him: he wouldn't be getting anywhere unless there were ears and hearts willing to hear it.

Last week, the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Churches (i.e. the Anglican Church in the USA) issued a statement entitled "A word to the Church," which bears hearing in their nation, in our nation and in all nations. They write,

"On Good Friday the ruling political forces of the day tortured and executed an innocent man. They sacrificed the weak and the blameless to protect their own status and power. On the third day Jesus was raised from the dead, revealing not only their injustice but also unmasking the lie that might makes right.

"We are troubled by the violent forces being released by this season's political rhetoric. Americans are turning against their neighbors, particularly those on the margins of society. They seek to secure their own safety and security at the expense of others. There is legitimate reason to fear where this rhetoric and the actions arising from it might take us.

"In this moment, we resemble God's children wandering in the wilderness. We, like they, are struggling to find our way. They turned from following God and worshiped a golden calf constructed from their own wealth. The current rhetoric is leading us to construct a modern false idol out of power and privilege. **We reject the idolatrous notion that we can ensure the safety of some by sacrificing the hopes of others.** No matter where we fall on the political spectrum, we must respect the dignity of every human being and we must seek the common good above all else. We call for prayer for our country that a spirit of reconciliation will prevail and we will not betray our true selves."

To me, this statement touches, not only on the question of **politics and principle**, but on several of Gandhi's seven points, and the heart of what Jesus was enacting in Holy Week. We live in days that are every bit as contentious as the days when the Jewish nation wondered if it would ever be free from the yoke of Roman oppression. We live in a world where crucifixion still happens, figuratively and literally, a world of blatant beheadings and more subtle forms of slowly-unfolding genocide. And as tempting as it may be for many, to pick up a palm branch and start yelling, in the hope that God will come riding in on a glistening stallion and cure it all by force, that isn't the way God works. It isn't how God works now and it wasn't how Christ presented himself all those centuries ago. They wanted the power of politics, but what God gave them was what they needed – a call to embodied love that would never turn its back on a world in need.

On Palm Sunday we are faced with the huge chasm, between what we want – an easy world where we hold power and prosperity – and what we need, God's own desire for a world rooted in servanthood, fairness, kindness, reconciliation and sacrificial love. Our natural desires draw us one way, the light of Christ illumines a different path. As we enter into the next step of our annual spiritual journey, to Easter through Good Friday, may our life's journey be lived alongside the one who walks the more difficult path – the path that, in the holiest of ironies, ultimately leads to life. In the name of Christ, caring and courageous, crucified and risen, Amen.

References cited:

Covey, Stephen R. *Principle-Centered Leadership*. NYC: Simon & Schuster, 1992. P.90.

Episcopal News Service. <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2016/03/16/episcopal-bishops-issue-a-word-to-the-church/>

Gandhi, Mahatma. "Seven Social Sins" at <http://www.mkgandhi.org/mgmnt.htm>

Stanley, Tiffany. "The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" at <http://religionandpolitics.org/2014/07/30/the-life-of-dietrich-bonhoeffer-an-interview-with-charles-marsh/>

© 2016 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church.