

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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March 25, 2018
Palm/Passion Sunday
Mark 11:1-11 & Philippians 2:5-11

Called to Become Proximate

There's something about the public coming together of people around a cause or an event that gives that cause or event a depth of meaning and purpose. On this Palm Sunday of 2018, it is perhaps a coincidence, or maybe it is providence, that this was the weekend that was chosen for the March for our Lives rallies that were held around the nation—and even the world—yesterday. Hundreds of thousands of people came together around a common desire for change and action of some kind in the wake of the numerous school shootings that our nation has experienced. At the very least, the magnitude of the size of these events has drawn the attention of the citizenry, the media, and political and community leaders. There is an air of energy, expectation and even excitement that has been and is flowing and swirling as a result of this movement.

When people share a common passion or commitment, they are drawn together to pool their energy and their resources to bring about a desired outcome. And the level and depth of passion will determine the overall significance and outcome. While it may be too early to predict where the March for our Lives movement will go, it is clear that there is much energy with it at the moment. And it appears to have the strength to bring about the change it seeks.

It is on Palm Sunday each year that we recall one of the events in Jesus' life where crowds of people publicly gathered around a cause and an event. On its surface, it's a joyous occasion where throngs of people rallied around Jesus as he made his entrance into Jerusalem. Riding atop a previously unriden colt, Jesus is accompanied by cheering people who lay their cloaks before him and wave branches as they shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Mk. 11:9-10)

With these shouts of acclamation and adulation, it is no wonder that this event is often referred to as Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But even if we don't know or remember all of the intervening details, the cross of Jesus' crucifixion on Friday looms on the horizon only a few short days in the future. How can this entry, this procession, this parade, this rally point to the kingship of Jesus, when it is death by crucifixion at the hands of Roman soldiers that awaits him?

As much as we like a parade, and as joyous an occasion is our celebration of that parade each year as we reenact that procession as we did at the beginning of this worship service, there are some details of the biblical account that are worth a closer look as we seek to understand how this event fits together with what is to come for Jesus. I'll cite just three of them.

First, the mention of the unriden colt is significant for a couple of reasons. That it has never been ridden signifies the royalty of Jesus. It is the tradition at the time, that as a member of the royalty is assuming the throne, he or she does it upon an unriden steed. It's at this point that a more subtle message is conveyed in that it was not a mighty steed upon which Jesus valiantly rides into Jerusalem, but a small and insignificant colt. Other translations suggest that it was more likely a donkey or an ass or a burro upon which Jesus rode. Clearly this royalty that was being conferred upon Jesus is much more humble if not even humiliating to come sauntering into Jerusalem rather than storming the city.

The second nuance about Jesus' entry is that he was riding into Jerusalem. In his day, Jerusalem was the seat of political power, the center of commerce, and the religious center. His coming into this particular city was a challenge to all three of those brokers of power and influence. And all three of

them were not at all open in any way to a challenge to their respective spheres. Leaders of all three will band together to attempt to thwart Jesus' power.

While these first two details definitely temper the power of this event, it is the third detail I want to ponder today that has really caught my attention this year. And that detail has to do with just who the crowds of people were that thronged about Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem.

The city of Jerusalem, at the time of Jesus' entrance, was filled with those who had made the pilgrimage there for the Jewish Passover, that annual celebration of God's liberation of the Jews enslaved by the Egyptians and the beginning of Moses' leading the people to the Promised Land. Passover is a celebration of God's deliverance from bondage to freedom. So the people in Jerusalem at the time were already in the mood for deliverance—deliverance of all kinds.

But it is quite likely that those who were drawn to notice Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the back of a colt or donkey would not have been those of any significance, influence or power. Rather, it would have been those who were among those most desperately seeking deliverance from their life situation. In other words, the crowds around Jesus that day of his triumphal entry were likely some of the poor and the downtrodden of Jesus' day.

Martin Luther, the 16th century Protestant reformer, writes of this event, "He sits not upon a proud steed, an animal of war, nor does he come in great pomp and power, but sitting upon an ass, an animal of peace fit only for burden and labor and a help to man. He indicates by this that he comes not to frighten man, nor to drive or crush him, but to help him and to carry his burden for man." ("First Sunday in Advent," *Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 1, *Sermons on Gospel Texts for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany*, ed. John Nicholas Lenker, trans. Lenker et al. (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker 1983), 19)

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was yet another demonstration of his identification with those who were the most in need of deliverance from oppression. Throughout his ministry to this point, Jesus has time and time again shown a clear preferential option for the poor and downtrodden. So when it comes time for him to reckon with the powers that be in Jerusalem, he chooses as his escorts those with whom he continues to resonate most consistently.

Jesus, by his every action and every teaching, calls his followers to emulate his example to become proximate—to get up close and personal—with those on the margins—those who have no other advocates.

It's now been a week since I returned to Bozeman following a week-long spring break mission trip to Miami, Florida with seven college students in our Presby Cats group. While we were in Miami, we were under the guidance and direction of DOOR Ministries, an organization that seeks to help groups like ours see the face of God in cities like Miami. Two weeks from today, members of our Presby Cats group will be leading our Sunday morning services. In those services you'll get to hear some reflections on their experiences by those who went to Miami. Today, though, is my chance to share a bit of my experience.

One of the places that we worked is at First United Methodist Church of Miami. This is an established church in the heart of Miami on Biscayne Blvd, right across the street from the Bayside Marketplace, a gargantuan shopping and entertainment complex along the bay in Miami. All around the church there is construction underway on one high-rise building after another. We were told by locals that the unofficial city bird of Miami is the crane—as in construction crane. And as we made our way into downtown Miami there were at least 5 such cranes high atop buildings currently under construction on the downtown skyline.

This construction boom in downtown Miami has placed tremendous pressure on First United Methodist Church since it is currently situated on some of the most valuable real estate in town. In spite of its central location, the church has found its membership not holding up with the growth of the neighborhood. Under the leadership of its pastor, the Rev. Audrey Warren, the church undertook a study that indicated that under present trends the congregation would likely not last more than 10 more years. With this knowledge in hand, the church has taken a very bold move, and working with a developer—one of dozens who have been approaching the church over the years—is taking steps to ensure that its ministry and presence in downtown Miami continues for decades to come.

First United Methodist Church of Miami has been a leading advocate and service center for the burgeoning homeless population in downtown Miami. The church provides meals, and social services to the homeless community where very limited services exist. Miami has very few homeless shelters—presumably because it is a tropical paradise—where the homeless population is over 4,000 people.

After we spent the morning working at the church, the associate pastor of outreach and evangelism, the Rev. Kipp Nelson, took us on a walking tour of downtown Miami. In the hour-long walk, he showed us some of the most opulent areas of downtown shimmering with wealth and abundance. And then within a few short blocks, he took us through some of the most desperate parts of town where the homeless poor are clearly evident. It was a stunning contrast of humanity.

First United Methodist Church of Miami is clearly following Jesus with his preferential option for the poor. For you see, they have sold their property for \$55 million. Proceeds from the sale are going into an endowment that will ensure that the services to Miami's homeless poor will continue as long as there is need. And not only that. The church negotiated with the developer that there will be two high-rise buildings constructed on the site. The first will contain a church facility on the lower floors with the upper 50+ floors containing rental apartments rather than condos. While they hesitate to call this affordable housing, they do call it accessible housing, since there are such limited rental properties in the downtown area. The second building will be an 80+ floor high-rise of condos more typical of the other high-rises in the area. The end result of this will be the continuation of a vital Christian witness and homeless ministry in downtown Miami.

As a public witness to its commitment to the homeless, in the Biscayne Blvd. entryway to the open-air courtyard of the church is a "Homeless Jesus Statue." It is a bronze sculpture by Canadian sculptor Timothy Schmalz that depicts Jesus as a homeless person, sleeping on a park bench. There is a photo of it on the bulletin cover. Statues like this are being installed in cities around the world. This church was selected as the site for the statue in Miami because of its commitment to serve the homeless. Among the many gripping features of this statue is that under the top of the blanket is Jesus' face. And his feet, poking out from under the blanket, show the wounds of the nails that pierced his feet during his crucifixion. Clearly this is the Jesus who died in total solidarity with everyone including the poor and the downtrodden. But what I find most gripping about the sculpture is that there is space on the bench on which Jesus is sleeping to sit with him. It's Jesus' invitation to join him in becoming proximate with those on the margins. It's his invitation to be his companion.

Palm Sunday is a day filled with nuance. It is a day for a parade accompanying Jesus.

It is a day to ponder the life and death of Jesus.

And it is a day to be called to become proximate to those with whom Jesus was proximate.



Homeless Jesus Statue

“Whatever you did for the least of these
you did for me” - Jesus

First United Methodist Church of Miami