

**San Lorenzo Community Church**

**United Church of Christ**

Sermon from Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, April 9, 2017

**Hear now a reading from Matthew 21:1-11**

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

<sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

<sup>5</sup> "Say to Daughter Zion,  
'See, your king comes to you,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

<sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. <sup>7</sup> They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. <sup>8</sup> A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

<sup>10</sup> When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

<sup>11</sup> The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

**This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.**

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This is a day of great paradox. On the one hand this is Palm Sunday. Wave your palm, high, higher in the air. Wave your palm branch. It's a parade – a triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The crowds loved him, couldn't get enough of him, lined the streets, hollered for attention, climbed trees to get a glimpse. Yet what they saw was a man riding a donkey. A donkey. What kind of triumphant entry is that? Shouldn't he be in one of those fancy convertibles like the grand marshals ride in every parade? Shouldn't he have had the first Pope-mobile? But no, the greatness and grandeur is set against the humility of a donkey.

Oh yes, Palm Sunday is a paradox – perhaps even a political statement, after all, Jesus chose to ride a donkey. Picked a donkey. Pointed to it and said, I'm going to ride that donkey into Jerusalem. An act of political protest, an act of social disruption, a living, breathing paradox of the choices we face between life and death. But it is not the first paradox of Jesus' life nor the last.

Between Palm Sunday and Good Friday, Jesus's disciples argued among themselves about who was the greatest, Judas betrayed him and then committed suicide, Peter denied ever knowing him, and all his disciples went for the hills to distance themselves from him.

After three years of itinerant preaching, teaching, and healing that focused on the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, and all who were oppressed, Jesus's family declared him insane, the religious establishment hated him, and the political authorities had had enough. And so Rome deployed all the brutal means at its disposal to crush an insurgent movement— they used rendition, interrogation, torture, mockery, humiliation, and then an execution designed as a "calculated social deterrent" (Borg) to any other trouble makers who might challenge imperial authority and disturb the status quo.

It is quite a change to go from the protest and resistance of Palm Sunday to a call for forgiveness by the time they share that meal on Thursday. But you know all of that -- Jesus' message has always been more about disruption than it has been about conformity. Jesus' vision has always been focused on the ones on the fringes rather than the ones in positions of power.

One June morning in 1859 years ago, Jean Henri Dunant woke up and opened his window in his beloved Switzerland. He heard an excited babble down in the street and quickly went down to see what was going on. He didn't hear much at first, but he caught the words "fighting" and "war" through all the confusion. He packed a few things and set out for he had learned that a war had started in Italy. He wanted to see for himself just what was going on.

Henri arrived in Italy where he saw soldiers fighting on the side of a hill near the town of Castiglione. He watched as men were hit by bullets, gave horrible cries, and fell to the ground. Henri had never seen anything like this before.

He knew that he should do something. You cannot stand by in the face of atrocity. We are better than that; we are called to more than that. So when the fighting stopped at dusk he went to the nearby town to ask people to go to the battlefield with him. Ordinary citizens: farmers, bakers and tailors responded at once. They spent the night giving as much aid as they could to all of those who were wounded – it didn't matter the nationality or which side of the battle; it didn't matter the rank or

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the race. All that mattered was there were wounded people crying for help and ordinary citizens came to their aid.

It was hard for Henri to forget what he had seen once he returned home, so he decided to write down his experiences. He described the horrible sight of battle and men being shot. He suggested that every country should have a relief society, a kind of emergency aid service to help wounded soldiers, to help those who would become collateral damage of war, to help refugees and those who suffer from natural disasters.

It was five years later before the first rescue society was organized in Geneva, Switzerland in 1864. It was called the Red Cross. And soon other countries joined. This idea that there can be a society where people would risk their lives to help those who are suffering and whose coordinated effort would be honored for their political neutrality and protected as a no-war-zone by governments seemed entirely unrealistic and utterly impossible to achieve. And yet, more than one hundred fifty years later, where there is war, where there is natural disaster and global emergencies, there are people who give up everything to serve those who in need under the humbleness of a flag with a Red Cross.

Shirley and I met in seminary and became instant friends. One night it was pouring rain – a big storm with the howling wind and buckets of rain, Shirley and I went to Burger King for a break from studying. Over a tense and tearful fast food meal, Shirley confided in me that she was gay and she was in love with someone and she was going to hell, for sure.

I cried with her. I told her nothing would ever separate her from the love of God and she was most definitely not going to hell. We talked about the frightening realities of the institutional church at the time and we talked about having to continue living in the closet because there were no other options. But we also imagined what it would be if it turned out that God's son was gay. Yes, we said out loud to one another – what if God had a son who was gay? Would that change the story at all?

You know what? It turns out God does have a son who is gay and God has daughters who are gay and God has children who are transgender and some who are straight and everything in between. And the story didn't change – Jesus is still the one who, despite the efforts of others and all of their ways and methods of debasement, Jesus is still the one who simply, profoundly and always poured himself out for others.

Shirley was parked in front of the school wiping off her car. She had just come from the car wash and was waiting for her wife to get out of work. She told me this story, "Coming my way from across the parking lot was what society would consider a bum. From the looks of him, he had no car, no home, no clean clothes, and no money. There are times when you feel generous but there are other times that you just don't want to be bothered. This was one of those "don't want to be bothered times."

"I hope he doesn't ask me for any money," I thought. He didn't. He came and sat on the curb in front of the bus stop but he didn't look like he could have enough money to even ride the bus. After a few minutes he spoke. "That's a very pretty car," he said.

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I said, "Thanks," and continued wiping off my car. He sat there quietly as I worked. The expected a plea for money but it never came. As the silence between us widened something inside said, "Ask him if he needs any help." I was sure that he would say "yes" but I held true to the inner voice. "Do you need any help?" I asked.

He answered in three simple but profound words that I will never forget. I expected nothing but an outstretched grimy hand. He spoke the three words that shook me. "Don't we all?" he said.

Here I was, she said, feeling high and mighty, successful and important, above a bum in the street, until those three words hit me like a ton of bricks. Don't we all?

I needed help. Maybe not for bus fare or a place to sleep, but I needed help. After all, I am human. So I reached in my wallet and gave him not only enough for bus fare, but enough to get a warm meal and shelter for the day.

She said, "Maybe the man was just a homeless stranger wandering the streets. But maybe he was more than that."

Yes, like that. Maybe this man was more than that.

On Friday, I got a piece of mail that boldly said on the envelope: "A message to Christians from the ACLU and the government." In another spot on the envelope it said "Keep your faith at home – or else . . ." and then, on the back of the envelope, it said "Open now to help stop the ACLU and its collaborators." As Cheryl handed me the mail that day, she said, "Whose mailing list did you get on?"

Evidently, I am now on the mailing list for the Alliance Defending Freedom and they want me to make a donation to "Stop attacks on my religious freedom!" I threw it away and said to myself, "the only attack on my religious freedom is organizations like you trying to cram your misguided interpretation of scripture down my throat." I felt pretty self-righteous, pleased with myself. And then, by Saturday morning, I took the letter out of my trash.

This nonprofit organization received over \$61 million dollars last year and they spent over \$23 million (over one-third of their annual budget) on the direct mail appeal like the one I got. This is one exceptionally well-tuned machine, cranking out fundraising and PR, reaching millions of people worldwide with their message to "transform law and culture so true freedom can flourish." And they define "true freedom" as "keeping the doors open for the gospel by advocating for religious liberty, sanctity of life and marriage and the family."

My friend Shirley doesn't stand a chance. The bum she helped that day doesn't stand a chance. All of those refugees needing aid and seeking shelter don't stand a chance. Heck, I don't have a chance. I just don't think I am going to fair very well in their scenario of freedom. What am I saying!? None of us have a chance because this definition of freedom picks who is in and who is out; it seeks to judge us and divide us as worthy and unworthy; it seeks to impose a narrow interpretation and claims ownership of what it means to be "God-given freedom." This isn't Christian love, this is war and violence against the most vulnerable.

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It makes me wonder on this Palm Sunday. What kind of chance do we have?

I think we are going to have to find the nearest donkey, pick up our palm branch and choose the paradox of Jesus. It's much harder than it sounds, frankly. It takes great courage to acknowledge the powers that be and yet make a non-violent protest with a show of moral courage. It takes inner strength to be persecuted by the institutions of the day and yet remain humble and kind in our actions and deeds. It takes an expansive love to know you are reviled by the townspeople and yet continue to speak to others with love and blessing. It takes humility and faithfulness to be betrayed by those nearest to you and yet offer forgiveness instead of rage. It takes the heart of Jesus to be crucified, dead and buried and yet to be filled with hope.

Oh yes, I believe we have a chance. We have a chance for wholeness and dignity. We have a chance for love and peace. So ride that donkey. Wave that palm branch. We have a chance, even in the midst of the state of the world today, if we have the courage to be humble and kind. Amen.