

Dr. Paul Tellström
Palm Sunday, Year A

Irvine United Congregational Church, UCC
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Gospel: Matthew 21:1-11

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Today is the day of the Great Procession, a day when the crowds came to cheer and lay palm branches before Jesus' colt as he made his way into Jerusalem, where ultimately the crowds would turn on him.

This week, there will be a different kind of procession moving throughout the country in each state. Close to 4,000 pairs of empty boots are ready to be laid out in a phantom procession, one pair for each service man or woman, each pair tagged with the name of a soldier that perished in Iraq. Too large now to travel as one display, the boots are moving in groups representing the state which their fallen soldiers called "home." The exhibit also makes a remembrance of the almost 90,000 Iraqi citizens who have been killed in a war that began five years ago this Wednesday.

It is called, "Eyes Wide Open," and it is the project of the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organization that includes people of various faiths who are committed to social justice, peace and humanitarian service. Its work is based on the belief in the worth of every person and faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice.

As the exhibit processes across the country, families and friends come to grieve for lost loved ones, and strangers honor those who gave their lives to a cause far from home.

At each stop, person after person leaves notes of commemoration, photographs of lost soldiers, identification tags, flowers, and American flags to accompany the boots on their journey.¹

The boots have been moving for several years now. Charlie Madigan, the editor of the Sunday Perspective section of the Chicago Tribune wrote about stopping by the Eyes Wide Open exhibit in Union Square when it was in New York over three years ago, and this is what he says:

"I headed off to Union Square today to see what was up after a night of listening to speeches at the Republican Convention and watching street protests. I found myself standing beside the boots representing Pfc. Joel K. Brattain, who was 21 and who came from California.

"These substitute boots, and a couple of pictures, were right between the substitute boots of Lance Cpl. Brad S. Shuder and Pfc. Steven Acosta. There were almost 1,000 other pairs of military boots standing in silence in Union Square too, all of them reflecting the sadness of soldiers and Marines killed in Iraq.

"The feeling was arresting. It stopped you right in place and forced you to look out over that field of black boots, marching to nowhere and to eternity at exactly the same time.

"Put all of that together and no one really had to shout about anything. The Quakers stood quietly around the boots, answering questions and waiting to update a post that had flip numbers on it representing the number of American servicemen killed in action. The number was at 974 when I looked at it. (It is 3,988 today.)

"Earlier in the day a veteran who was walking in Union Square asked if he could be the one to flip over the numbers counting American war dead. He made it to exactly one number, 974 she said, and then he was overcome by emotion and, weeping, had to stop."²

I invite you to join us this Wednesday evening on the corner of Alton and Culver, as we display some of the empty boots from the "Eyes Wide Open" exhibit and stand as witnesses to the fifth anniversary of a war that has touched us all and even perhaps driven a wedge between us.

The way of Christ, even as we see him riding today through the crowds on a simple colt, is the way of ahimsa, the way of witness, the way of nonviolence in a violent world.

Mahatma Gandhi led the people of India through a passive resistance that ended in their liberation from British domination. Gandhi based his methods on the person and activities of Jesus.

Of this method he said, “First they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.” In an age that has brought us the kind of terrorism we have witnessed, it is more than understandable that the ways of Gandhi, King, and even Jesus himself appear to be untenable, even quaint—but they are reminders nonetheless of what the pathways to the realm of God must look like.

Hear the words of Jesus from our scripture today: “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.”

In other words, if we know that by giving something of ourselves that we have kept tied up for our own purposes could further the realm of God on earth, then we would give it gladly. What we give might even entail the ultimate sacrifice of one’s life, such as was the case of Gandhi, Dr. King, or one of our best and brightest, believing they are fighting terrorism. Dr. King once even said, “Even if they try to kill you, you develop the inner conviction that there are some things so precious, some things so eternally true that they are worth dying for. And if a person has not found something to die for, that person isn’t fit to live!”

Or, it could be in the giving of something much simpler, such as the way one poor woman in New York City gave the gifts of her time and love because, as the scripture says, “the Lord needs them”.

Mark Adams tells a story about a pastor of an inner city church in New York City. The area around his church is a very violent place. He has been stabbed twice as he moved among the people of the community surrounding the church.

He tells about a Puerto Rican woman who became involved in the church and asked him about what she could do for the church. He asked her what her talents were and she couldn’t think of anything. She couldn’t speak much English, but she did love children. So he put her on one of the church’s buses that went into neighborhoods and transported kids to church. Every week she performed her duties. She would find the worst-looking kid on the bus, put him on her lap and whisper over and over the only words she had learned in English: “I love you. God loves you.”

After several months, she became attached to one little boy in particular. The boy didn’t speak. He came to Sunday school every week with his sister and sat on the woman’s lap, but he never made a sound. Each week she would tell him all the way to Sunday school and all the way home, “I love you and God loves you.”

Finally, one day, the boy who never spoke turned around and stuttered, “I---I---I love you too!” Then he put his arms around her and gave her a hug. That was 2:30 on a Sunday afternoon. A few hours later, he was killed by his own mother.

“I love you and God loves you.” These were some of the last words this little boy heard in his short life—from the lips of a woman who could barely speak English. She gave her one talent, telling children that they are loved and that God loves them, and because of that a little boy who never heard the word “love” in his own home, experienced and responded to that love.

What can we give? If someone came to us and told us that something we had was needed, would we untie that rope that holds us (or that which we possess) in place, and give it away? What is your “colt”? You and I each have something in our lives, which, if given back in gratitude, could, like the colt, move the message of how to bring about the realm of God as taught by Christ further down the road.³

What is further down that road, as scripture tells us, is the turning of the crowd. At first, they are cheering, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” But further into the city of Jerusalem, we hear the larger crowd: “the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’”.

Dr. King was a man who knew crowds well, and he once said, “Crowd pressures have

unconsciously conditioned our minds and feet to move to the rhythmic drumbeat of the status quo. Many voices and forces urge us to choose the path of least resistance, and bid us never to fight for an unpopular cause and never to be found in a minority of two or three.”

On this day of waving palms, if you were asked, what would you untie and give to helping to move what you understand to be the message of our faith further through the voices of the crowds today? Perhaps it would be something as simple as being a loving presence and witness to a child, an elder, or the person who just needs an ear—just needs to know that someone cares. Like the American Friends Service Committee, our work might be said to be based on the belief in the worth of every person and faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice in the face of the status quo; in the pressures of the self-serving crowd.

If, as Dr. King said, “Many voices and forces urge us to choose the path of least resistance, and bid us never to fight for an unpopular cause and never to be found in a minority of two or three,” will we have the strength and courage, as did Christ, to take our witness and our message through the crowds and right up to the seats of both secular and religious power, as did Christ, and bring that witness there?

Ongoing witness to hypocrisy and corruption, to the immorality of killing no matter where it takes place, to the \$720 million dollars we spend each day on a war that drains funds needed for education, health care, and the world you will leave for your children in a country that really does at it’s core stand for so much that is good; to our witness to the importance of looking after the common good before the self. Witness even, and perhaps especially, to a child who never had anyone look into his or her eyes and say, “I love you and God loves you”.

“First they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.” AMEN.

Sermon Resources

1. Information adapted from the “Eyes Wide Open” website www.afsc.org/eyes
2. Charlie Madigan, Chicago Tribune, September 2004, condensed. For full story, see: <http://peacechicago.blogspot.com/2004/09/chicago-tribune-goes-to-ny.html>
3. Adapted from Mark Adams, “The Roads He Walked: Palm Avenue”

Scripture for Palm Sunday, March 16, 2008

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Beth’phage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.”

This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”