

April 13, 2014

National Presbyterian Church

Caring Enough

Zechariah 9:9; John 12: 9-15; John 13:1-20

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As Jesus entered Jerusalem he began to teach the people. He began to teach them about living and dying and bearing fruit. And then on the night when he was betrayed, the night before his crucifixion, with his disciples in an upstairs room, he set before them an example of humility. Let me read to you as well from the next chapter in John's gospel, the 13th Chapter:

“Now before the festival of the Passover Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas, a son of Simon Iscariot to betray him and during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hand and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. . . After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe and had returned to the table he said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done for you? You call me teacher and Lord and you are right for that is what I am. So if I your lord and teacher have washed your feet you also ought to wash one another's feet for I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly I tell you servants are not greater than their master nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things you are blessed if you do them.”

In our sermons through the season of Lent, the five weeks leading up to Palm Sunday and Holy Week, we have been focusing together on the ministry of caring which Jesus entrusted to us individually as his followers, and which he entrusted to us together as a church.

As a community we should be known for the care that we show toward one another. People who come to National should be able to see and say that this is a caring community. And people should know as they look at our individual lives that we are people who can be trusted, who care for each other because of who Jesus was, what he did, and what he said to us.

So we've been focusing on “caring enough” –

1. *Caring enough to act* when something needs to be done,
2. *Caring enough to pray* when perhaps nothing can be done except we offer a friend or somebody in need to God in prayer;

3. *Caring enough to listen* when it seems as if we're doing nothing. But listening can be powerful.

4. *Caring enough to comfort* when somebody is going through a time of loss or a time of transition, walking alongside somebody in a difficult part of their journey.

5. (And then last week) *Caring enough to receive* – We cannot care as we ought, as Jesus did, unless we first of all receive – receive his life and his power within us. We will run out of our own resources if we keep on giving and giving. There will be nothing left but an empty well – unless we are first of all receivers both from each other and from God, who, through Jesus Christ, longs to fill us with the ongoing power of his Holy Spirit. But more than that, we cannot give as we ought unless we, like Jesus, stoop down to others: not only to be beside them but below them, caring “from beneath,” as those who are needy ourselves. Otherwise our giving, our caring, and our sharing will be patronizing; we must never forget that we are fellow travelers too. As those called to give, as those called to care, we are also those who must first of all be receivers; knowing our need as well.

So this is where we've been: thinking about the ministry of caring. And this Sunday, this Palm Sunday, we come to the end of our series by thinking in particular about Jesus' care for us. Jesus' care for us, even in the last moments, in the last hours, in the last days of his life. Jesus: caring enough to lead us like a king and to act at the same time like a servant.

As we think about the last moments of Jesus' life I want to do so with the help of the two passages from John's gospel that we read earlier: the 12th Chapter of John's gospel and the 13th Chapter of John's gospel.

- The 13th Chapter speaks about Jesus caring enough to notice his disciples; noticing the needs that the disciples had, stooping down to wash their feet. Weary and tired as they were they didn't notice him so much as he noticed them, and set for them an example of noticing and caring, and doing whatever needed to be done, no matter how low it might seem to be, for others.
- And in the 12th Chapter we find the gospel account speaking about Jesus caring enough to enter the city of Jerusalem, descending the Mount of Olives on a path that he knew would lead to his death for you and me – descending not only to the place where he would willingly wash our feet, but through his death to the place where he could wash our sins away and restore our relationship with God. Caring enough to join that procession with all the palms waving and all the songs being sung . . . on the way to his death.

As we come to those two passages let me set the scene by going back in history somewhere between 150 and 200 years before this particular time. Going back, in fact, to 141 B.C. and then to 167 B.C. If you were in Jerusalem on particular days in those years you might have seen some other processions in which there was the waving of palms. One of those parades celebrated the deliverance of God's people from foreign oppression and taxation and one of those processions celebrated the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem from desecration by the king of Syria. For

about 7 years the Syrian king Antiochus IV (who was also known as Epiphanes – “epiphany” means “manifestation” and Antiochus took this name because he believed he was the manifestation of the Greek god, Zeus) – had sent his troops and people to Jerusalem, trying to change Jerusalem into a Greco-Roman city, into what he would have considered to be a “modern” city; pulling it out of the past, out of its heritage, out of its Jewishness and into the ethos of the Mediterranean world, the modern Mediterranean world, dominated by the cultures of Greece and Rome. He built new buildings in the city and brought all kinds of different events to the city (including athletic events that included public nudity) to change the way the city and its state operated. And at the climax of everything that he did, in the year 167 BC, he took his final step: he banned the practice of Jewish worship in their own temple, in their own holy city. He banned the practice of Jewish worship, and instead he erected in the temple itself an altar to the Greek god, Zeus. And all hell broke loose. Antiochus thought that he had more power than he had; that nobody, nobody, would rise up against his power. But his action set off a firestorm, just as a firestorm would be set off on the temple mount this very day beside the Dome of the Rock or the Al-Aqsa Mosque if somebody set up any kind of altar to any other god than the one true God. Muslims and Jews and Christians would all rise up in protest together at what they would consider to be an outrage. So you can imagine from the fragility of the Middle East today, the kind of turmoil, the kind of fire that was lit by Antiochus’ action.

And a fire was lit indeed! A revolt took place, an *intifada*, if you like, took place. A religious and a cultural and a political war began with the most unlikely figures taking the lead: a family of country priests by the name of the Maccabees took the lead, fighting against the power of the Syrian king and his armies. Shaye Cohen, Professor of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy at Harvard, says this was history’s first recorded struggle for religious liberty (in his *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*). And against all the odds they won. Judas Maccabeus and his brothers won the day. Second Maccabees records the first victory, the purification of the temple like this (2 Macc.10):

Judas Maccabeus and his followers under the leadership of the Lord recaptured the temple in the city of Jerusalem. They tore down the altars which foreigners had set up. They purified the temple and built a new altar. After they had done all this they lay face down on the ground and prayed that the Lord would never again let such disaster strike them. They begged him to be merciful when he punished them for future sins and not hand them over any more to barbaric pagan Gentiles. They rededicated the temple on the 25th day of the month of Kislev, the very same day of the month on which the temple had been desecrated by the Gentiles. *But now they were carrying green palm branches and sticks decorated with ivy and they paraded around singing grateful praises* [italics mine] to him who had brought about the purification of his own temple and everyone agreed that the entire Jewish nation should celebrate this festival every year which they have done from that day to this. [DR: This is the origin of Hanukkah].

The temple had been purified but not all of the enemies had been defeated. It took a further twenty three years for all of Judah's enemies to be defeated and for Judah was no longer a conquered or a client state, owing taxes to anyone. So, twenty three years later there was another parade, recorded for us in First Maccabees 13, where we read:

On the 23rd day of the second month there was a great celebration in the city because this terrible threat to the security of Israel had come to an end. Simon Maccabeus [DR: Judas was now dead] and his men entered the fort [in Jerusalem] *singing hymns of praise and thanksgiving while carrying palm branches and playing harps and cymbals and lyres* [italics mine].

And with this event very quickly Judas' brother, Simon Maccabeus, was named both "high priest" and "ethnarch" (the ruler of the people), the conquering victorious king of the people.

There is no doubt to me, and I think to many others, that every detail of these stories would have been known by the people who lived in Jerusalem when Jesus lived. Not just by the adults but by the children as well. By this time those first two books of the Maccabees had already been written. The stories would have been read and re-read, told and retold, and everybody would have known the details of what had happened in their holy city.

As a parallel, for example, every Scottish child knows the dates of great Scottish battles. You go back 250 years (and, remember, the activities of the Maccabees took place less than 200 years before Jesus), and there's the battle in 1746 known as Culloden. We lost that one. You go back to 1513, 500 years, and there's the battle of Flodden. And we lost that one too. Every child knows these dates, even the losses. You go back to 1314 to the battle of Bannockburn 700 years ago, and we won that one! And it's as if . . . as if that victory was just yesterday!

Well, there is no doubt that when Jesus chose to descend the Mount of Olives sitting on a donkey that people knew what he was doing.

- There is no doubt that here he was deliberately fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah (9:9), that when God's victorious king would come again he would come seated on a donkey. It may look humble, but this was the prescribed mode of transport for the conquering king who would rule the earth and have dominion over the nations 'from sea to sea.'
- And there is no doubt that when Jesus did not stop the crowd from waving palm branches and singing as he entered the city he knew what he was doing. He knew the power of that symbolism, how it would evoke all those memories. He knew that people would understand that he was claiming (albeit indirectly but nevertheless powerfully) to be like Simon Maccabaeus: first, God's high priest – the one who could bring us into the presence of God and, second, God's king who would know the best direction for their lives, and who, against all the odds, odds far greater than those of the Maccabees, would deliver God's people from

every kind of foreign oppression, every kind of domination and from every aspect of false religion – and set them free.

And yet, as the following week unfolded, as Palm Sunday was left behind, and as Jesus entered Jerusalem and began to teach, what became increasingly clear was that there would be no repeated revolt, there would be no repeated *intifada*, there was no army, there were no weapons (well, one of Jesus' disciples had a sword but that was about it: unlike Reza Aslan's recent claim in his book, *Zealot*, Jesus was no zealot!) Instead by the next Friday, within just a few days, this same Jesus who entered Jerusalem as a conquering king in a manner following a great tradition that had gone before him, was hanging upon a wooden cross dying, and then was "dead and buried," leaving behind some wonderful teaching about death and dying, about humility and bearing fruit, but nothing amounting to a confirmation that he was indeed a great king or high priest!

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain but if it dies it bears much fruit," said Jesus between Palm Sunday and his death.

And then, on the night before his death he washes his disciples' feet and says that they are to do the same.

A great lesson on humility. But that's it! But if that was really "it" then the bigger issues had clearly flopped and failed; this call to be the king, and the big expectation set in motion by the Maccabees had surely failed with his death. It had all failed. He'd seemingly lost his nerve, lost his cause, and then lost his life so unnecessarily.

This is how it might have seemed, and would have remained – were it not, of course, for Easter, for the Resurrection, for what we believe God did on that first Easter Sunday in raising Jesus from the dead . . . when all of a sudden (moving back in time from Easter to Good Friday to Palm Sunday) the lights seem to go on: the disciples begin to see that Palm Sunday and Good Friday are not tragic failures, but that the one descending the Mount of Olives on a donkey that day,

- really was, against all the odds, God's victorious king;
- really was, against all the odds, the king washing feet;
- really was the one suffering on the cross, not in vain, but on purpose for people like you and me *who need not only our feet to be washed but our repeated sins to be washed away day by day.*

It really appeared (but only after Sunday had come) as if the one coming down the hill that day was the king who loved his people, who cared for his people, who had the power to lead his people to where they ought to be, even though that path was the path of humble discipleship. It was no one less than *the king* who was there that day.

I think we all know how devastating it is when somebody who is important to us, maybe important in real life to many other people but important to us personally, does not notice us, does not pay us any attention, somehow passes us by. It can be very painful indeed.

Business consultant Barbara Moses tells of an incident which was shared with her by a client who came into her office and simply burst out with something that was remarkable in its pain and in its simplicity. She said “you know I went to work last week and it seemed as if all my colleagues were dressed up more than they normally were and I wasn’t. And then at lunch time she said they all left and I didn’t. And after lunch I discovered that they had been invited to a luncheon to which I had not been invited by my boss.” And she said I just can’t get over it, this sense of being left out by this person who is important to me. I’m not on the inside, I’m on the outside. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/career-advice/does-your-boss-play-favourites/article4170253/>

We all know that negative feeling. But I think we also know that positive feeling too – when somebody who is important, who is for us a king or a queen, really *does* enter our lives and out of the crowd somehow notices us, and makes a beeline for us, and counts us to be more precious, as it were, than everybody else. The best of all is when everybody is treasured but we still know that we are at the point of attention. It’s wonderful when that happens, when a person who for us is “the king” notices and cares for us, his followers, in the way that he does.

Some of you may know that the big human interest story during the NCAA basketball competition just in the past few weeks, was about the relationship between a 7-foot player from Michigan State by the name of Adreian Payne and an 8-year-old cancer patient by the name of Lacey Holsworth. They met two years ago in East Lansing, Michigan, at the Sparrow Hospital, where the Michigan State basketball team were visiting children, and perhaps others as well. But Adreian latched onto Lacey, and Lacey latched onto Adreian. They became buddies at that moment. Sometimes when those visits take place it’s just a “one and done” event; you’re in the hospital and it’s over. But in this case it wasn’t. It wasn’t. The relationship lasted. All the way through this recent competition she was there. She was the cheerleader as it were for the team. Her parents said that having received the diagnosis of terminal cancer the joy quite naturally, especially with all the medication, had gone out of her life, until that relationship took place. And the joy was restored. This person of importance, of enormous stature, whom she called “Superman” had come into her life and she was named by him “Princess.” Powerful – though what needs to be added is that just this past week, Lacy lost the struggle against her disease; as soon as the NCAA competition was over she died. But she died knowing not only the love of her parents (a wonderful love that accompanied her through all of that time) but of this one person who stood out from the crowd and who noticed her and counted her precious.

Jesus, the Palm Sunday King, notices us. Jesus the Palm Sunday King knows us, pays attention to us, stoops down to our level, would wash our feet if that’s what we needed, but stoops even further on the cross to wash our sin away. And he calls us. He calls us to follow in his footsteps. As king he gives us marching orders. He calls us to be leaders who do not use our

power and authority to dominate other people but to care for them and serve them, just as he cares for us and serves us as well: “*You call me teacher and Lord and you are right,*” says Jesus to his disciples, “*for that is what I am,*” even though, when he said it, it did not look like it. Even though, when he said it, he was going to his death. He is their teacher and their Lord and their king so he says, “*If I your Lord and teacher have washed your feet you also ought to wash one another’s feet.*” (John 13:12-14)

That’s Jesus’ teaching. We may say to ourselves, “Well that’s all well and good, but the world doesn’t really work that way. How nice! Jesus the king teaches us to serve as he served himself!” And we may be quite dismissive of this in the real world to which we will all return tomorrow. But the fact of the matter is this: that even in the business world to this day there are people who increasingly believe that what Jesus teaches here is powerful, and brings remarkable benefits even in the secular world in which we live.

One of the great theories of management these days is called the theory of “servant leadership.” “Servant leadership” became a phrase that entered the business world vocabulary at a particular time – some 40 years ago, in 1970, because of management guru by the name of Robert Greenleaf. Robert Greenleaf was the one who coined the phrase, not first of all by looking at Jesus (though later on he did), but by piecing together what he read (especially in Herman Hesse, *Journey to the East*) and what he saw in various effective businesses. He simply reached the *conclusion that leadership which does not serve is not as effective as leadership that does*. In the real world, he said, this works. This is what he wrote in 1970 (in *The Servant As Leader*):

The servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first and only then the conscious choice to aspire to be a leader. If you get it the wrong way around he says it won’t work. But if your passion is to serve and then you sense the call to lead you will be highly effective . . . There is a sharp difference between those who have it one way and those who have it another . . . The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test is to ask ‘do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, became healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived by the way we exercise authority?

Servant first, he says. It can have a powerful effect on the lives of others in the secular world; and it’s what Jesus propounded all those years ago: Jesus the servant and the Palm Sunday king!

On that first Palm Sunday the word is clear. “*I am the king!*” says Jesus, even if his lips do not move. With the palm branches waving he is saying “*I am the king. I am the one who has come to deliver*” unlikely as it may seem with his death so imminent! “*With more power than the Maccabees I have come to deliver. I am the king, and I choose to deliver through acts of service and I choose to call you as my followers to do the same.*”

My friends it's not just anybody who notices us.

It is the king who notices us and who loves us and seeks our best.

It is the king who lives for us and dies for us. Not just to wash our feet but to wash our sins away and who tells us that we are to serve one another by forgiving one another again and again, and again and again, as he does, willing even to die to forgive us.

It's the king who calls us to be kings and queens like him. To lead but not by dominating over others, not by forcing our view on others, not by manipulating others – but by this hard and weary path that does not look like anything of any great importance to anyone else, which we can only follow if we are empowered by God; leading others by serving and caring in the power of God Himself.

If the king, if the king was the one who came to serve and calls us to follow, who do we think we are if we do not do the same?

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