

PALM SUNDAY, April 9, 2016

National Presbyterian Church

Celebrated and Betrayed

Luke 19:29-40; 23:13-23, 34; Matthew 6:15

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In our sermons this year, we've been thinking through basic Christian faith with the help of *The Apostles' Creed* (see www.creeds.net) – one of the oldest and most widely used summaries of what Christians have always believed since the time of Jesus. And this morning I'd like us to think about the phrase in the Creed in which we say that we believe in “the forgiveness of sins.” This is a phrase intended to point us not only to God's passion to forgive us, but also to our need to be “forgivers” of others. And I'd like us to think about this forgiveness, God's and ours, in the context of **the last week of Jesus' life** – his entrance into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday, and the week that followed, leading to his crucifixion and death.

But to do this, we need to go back to the preceding two to three years that brought Jesus to these critical moments. According to Luke's account of Jesus (3:23), he was about 30 years old when he left the carpenters shop in his home town of Nazareth in Galilee in the rural northern part of Israel and began a ministry of preaching and teaching accompanied by love and care and miracles, especially of healing.

Word spread quickly that something was going on and great crowds began to gather: some focused **on his preaching** and said things like “we've never heard anything like this before: he speaks about God with an authority that is quite different from what we've ever heard.” (Matt. 7:28-29; John 7:45-46). And others focused **on his miracles and claims**

“Who is this person?” they asked, “who speaks, and even the winds and waves obey?” (Mark 4:41). What's his relationship to God? Who IS HE?

The Messiah? The King? The Savior? God himself? (John 1:41; Matthew 11:3).

Pretty soon the crowds expanded beyond the locals, and officials from the big city of Jerusalem turn up. And while, to begin with, they might have thought that here was just another country preacher who would come and go, it didn't take them long to realize that he was actually a threat to them, and to the status quo as a whole:

What they saw was that he not only had “miraculous” power, but he had the power to stir up the crowds – to foment a revolution if that's what he wanted. And also he had the power to make their leadership redundant

- He welcomed people whom they deemed to be traitors and heretics (Mark 2:13-17)
- He broke the age-old traditions about keeping the Sabbath day holy (of which they were the guardians; Mark 3:2)
- He put practical caring above the keeping of religious rules (about which they were experts; Luke 14:5)
- He created a sense of “church” – of God's presence – in towns and villages and hillsides – that made churches like ours (!) – look out of date or irrelevant (Matthew 5-7, 14:13-21)

And soon they realized that if this man wasn't stopped then not only would the Jewish religious and political establishment lose their power, but the stability of the nation as a whole was at stake as well: if Jesus' control of the people ever got to the stage where the Roman imperial power was threatened (the Romans had occupied Palestine for almost 100 years at this time) then truly, all hell might break loose; and the nation might be crushed (John 11:45-48). **And that was unacceptable!** So plans began to emerge to silence Jesus, to "take him out" (Mark 11:18).

And, after a few years, when Jesus decided to come to Jerusalem the center of power, and to do so at Passover time (this would have the same emotional power as a march on Washington on July 4th if we ever faced a time when the United States was under occupation), when the city was packed and uncontrollable [the late German scholar, Joachim Jeremias, estimated that the daily population of 20-30,000 became approximately 150,000!], well, it seemed to them that the time to pounce, to act, was right.

Indeed, their decision was confirmed by the way Jesus entered the city – sitting on a donkey – with crowds cheering him on. This might not seem so big a deal to us, but it was the precise action of the Messiah predicted hundreds of years before by the prophet Zechariah (9:9):

*Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious,
-- lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

This was as clear a claim to be a king – God's king – as you could get.

And while the crowds cheered Jesus on his way (desperate for a leader to lead them out of humiliation and chaos); the religious leaders made plans to draw the Roman authorities into the picture and to manipulate those very same crowds. So that 5 days later many of them instead of shouting his praises, would be shouting "**CRUCIFY him! Crucify him!**" And this they did.

The contrast between the atmosphere on Palm Sunday and on the next Friday, what we call, Good Friday, was stunning. How fickle was the Palm Sunday praise of the crowd: skin deep, a mere flash in the pan, a knee-jerk reaction – and not just the crowd in general, but even among Jesus' closest friends: pretty much all of them except the faithful women who followed him, abandoned him too!

And the use of power was stunning as well. Of course, there were good guys in the establishment: the opposition to Jesus wasn't unanimous among the religious leadership. But the fact that so many of those in power who should have cared for the people they claimed to serve never did; and that who should have given Jesus more of a hearing but chose instead to close their ears and bring their power down on his head, should make us just as sick and angry as we get when helpless children and families are bombed or gassed.

It was all so brutally unfair and wrong, and Jesus could so easily have chosen to allow bitterness and anger and disappointment to bubble over into resentment and the clamor for vengeance – as it did to Edmond Dantes, in Alexandre Dumas' story of *The Count of Monte Cristo*:

Dantes was betrayed by his best friend and other conspirators, and spent 6 years in a prison before escaping and finding great wealth and then spending the rest of his life plotting his revenge! Though, of course, he would never let it show, those who did this to him would pay! And pay they did: justice in exquisite ways was done!

Though, the truth of course, is that spending our lives, getting our own back and seeking justice for ourselves and judgment on those who've betrayed us – and deserve it – can also leave us feeling hollow and empty.

This is something that three remarkable women discovered not long after September 11, 2001. Rose Foti, Diane Horning and Lynn McGuire each lost someone they loved when the Twin Towers came crashing down on that day. (Their stories are told in a PBS documentary on [The Power of Forgiveness](#)).

They lost two sons and a husband, Matthew, Robert and Frank. And they had to deal with their anger; they had to deal with their grief; they had to deal with their bitterness at the terrorists. But the action of the terrorists was not the only bitterness that they had to deal with. Something else happened following the disaster which made them even more bitter, and which was much harder for them to let go of and to forgive.

One day, they discovered that trucks had come and removed some of the debris and ashes from the World Trade Center site, and had taken it to a dump somewhere in New Jersey. For them, though, it wasn't just debris was it? It was sacred! It contained the ashes of those they loved – and the last possibility of creating a holy moment out of what was truly evil – of caring in death for those they loved in life, was gone! Just like that. And the anger, the frustration, the bitterness and the sense of helplessness that began with the terrorists, began to increase and multiply. The questions wouldn't go away. *How could this happen? Who gave the permission for this? Who used their bureaucratic authority to approve this?*

And driven by their bitterness they gave themselves to seek justice in this situation, until they reached a point where they realized that the kind of justice *that actually satisfied* in any way was probably never going to be found.

Who do you blame? The truck drivers? The dump site managers? The person swamped with responsibility-above-their-pay-grade who signed the order – forgetting that it wasn't quite the same as all the others?

And even if the answers could be found, the truth was that nobody could ever undo this act which had caused them such uncontrollable grief and pain, and which – they began to realize – *was now destroying them too!*

And together, as they supported each other, (which they had done from the beginning), they made a decision: ***to let it all go, just let it go; and move on.***

The same happened in South Africa after Apartheid. South Africa had a choice to make: What do you do with those who have committed the most horrible crimes against their fellow human beings because of race and power? Do you pursue them for decades to come? Ensuring precise justice for all? But keeping the horror alive in front of the nation, and so postponing the healing?

Or, do you set up a system whereby a different kind of justice will be served by the full telling of the truth and “the remission of sins” – the offer of forgiveness, even of the most heinous of sins? And that, of course, in the ***Truth and Reconciliation Commission*** was what they chose to do.

So Jesus is betrayed and abandoned by both the strong and the weak; by both those who have always hated him, and by those who've always loved him.

And Jesus has a choice to make as to how he will handle this. He has the power to make them all pay, every single one of them, for what they've done: to hand out a justice that would crush them. But this is NOT what he chooses to do. Instead he chooses to use his power to love and heal and bring reconciliation

On the cross itself, the instrument of his death at their hands he publicly shares his decision **not** to seek revenge, **nor** to bring the full force of justice down on them, **but** to bear the injustice in himself, to pay for the injustice and carry the injustice in himself, SO THAT HE COULD FORGIVE (Luke 23:34):

“Father forgive them,” he cries out, ***“for they know not what they do”***

This was his choice back then, on this very week almost 2000 years ago, with those who betrayed him in big ways and small, and this remains his choice for you and me today! We may not hang him on a tree,

But there is no one who does not betray him, in one way or another, or disappoint him, or let him down. But Jesus chose to believe in THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS.” And we must too!

BUT there's a catch. Not a condition, but a catch: the need for evidence that we really get it – that God didn't have to forgive us; God didn't owe it to us; and when Jesus made the choice not to crush us with his justice, it wasn't cheap, or easy, but painful and costly.

And the catch is this: that those who know the price of God's mercy and the cost of Jesus' forgiveness will show it: they will always feel uneasy holding on to any kind of grudge, or withholding forgiveness from those who – in whatever way – (in reality or perception) we feel have wronged us.

Or, to put it another way: If we know and truly believe in God's forgiveness of our sins, then we ourselves will feel duty bound to share with others the same gift of forgiveness that we ourselves have received.

This is something Jesus makes clear in his Sermon on the Mount. In the Lord's Prayer (part of the Sermon on the Mount), Jesus teaches us to pray not only that God would “forgive us our debts” but with the caveat that God does it “as we forgive our debtors.” And he spells out the meaning and seriousness of these words at the conclusion of the prayer when he adds these daunting and haunting words (Matt 6:14-15)

***“For if you do not forgive others their trespasses against you
Neither will your heavenly father forgive you your trespasses.”***

“Lord” said one of Jesus' followers, Simon Peter, to him one day (Matt. 18:21-22): “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. In other words more than you can count!

So who's that person for you?

What's that sin? That slight? That omission? Or action?

(1) **Who is it?** Who is like the Palm Sunday crowd to you? One day fawning all over us? And the next day, stabbing us in the back? Or perhaps worse, just forgetting about us completely?

(2) **And what wound** are we holding on to from the past, what wound do we nurse, allowing it to eat into our lives, and suck God's life out of us?

GO, says Jesus, sort it out one-on-one, as soon as you can!!

And whether you can sort it out or not, forgive, let go, move on!

On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus knew what was happening

And what was about to happen. He knew about the plots and schemes to bring him down, to “take him out.” He knew that the shouts of praise would soon disappear, to be replaced with “*Crucify Him! Crucify him.*”

BUT, thank God: from the get-go, and to this very day, his plan was to forgive! And he calls for us to adopt this same plan ourselves.

“WE believe in the forgiveness of sins!”

- *God’s forgiveness of mine.*
- *My forgiveness of others.*

Do we? Do you believe this too? Make it so, this Holy Week. Make it so.

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