

Date: April 9, 2006

SUNDAY: Palm Sunday

SERMON: Memorable Love

Text(s): Mark 11:1-11, 14:1-9; Philippians 2:5-11

© 2006 L. R. Kalajainen

Well, spring in Maine is being its usual fickle self again this year. For a couple of weeks there, even my daffodils were fooled into thinking that winter was over. Even though some people in Brunswick mark the beginning of spring with the opening of Fat Boys, I've discovered that it's my daffodils that tell me when it's really spring. Last year, when we had those really late spring snowstorms, they didn't even poke their heads up until the end of May; this year, the ones near my front porch have sprouted about four inches already. Hopefully, this past week's weather was only a brief setback, but around here, it's never safe to presume that spring is going to arrive before it does.

When we lived in Paris, it wasn't the daffodils that were the harbingers of spring; since the ground never freezes, they were always up by late February or early March at the latest. No it was when the tourists began to bloom that we knew spring was really arriving. When we looked out our front windows and saw gaggles of white sneaker-shod, guidebook-toting, tired-looking people trudging past our building, on their way to the Eiffel Tower or Napoleon's tomb, we knew spring had arrived.

St. Mark's story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem put me in mind of those processions of tourists that we saw regularly passing in front of our apartment. To call it a procession conjures up an image of a grand parade. The hymns we sing on Palm Sunday contribute to that image. But Mark describes it as a kind of ragtag, disorganized, and rather motley affair, with a few gaggles of people parading and others looking on.

Each of the Gospel writers paints a somewhat different picture of this event, emphasizing or inserting particular details to put their own spin on it. Matthew and John, for

example, portray it as a much grander affair with nearly the whole city of Jerusalem turned out to hail Jesus as their king. Those are the accounts on which most of our hymns and mental images are based. But in Mark's story, the only people hailing Jesus' arrival are those who have accompanied him from Galilee—a rather rag-tag gaggle of peasants and artisans. Mark's casting of the story as a kind of peasant parody of a royal procession is very likely deliberate, perhaps mocking the triumphal procession of Titus, the Roman conqueror of Jerusalem, which occurred at about the time Mark was writing his gospel in A.D. 70.

Mark mentions no troops of Roman soldiers leading Jesus or troops of captured enemies or booty following him in triumph into the city. His followers hail him as the long-awaited Messiah-king of David's royal lineage, but no one else does. This king comes riding on a donkey rather than the traditional kingly white horse. This king's conquering army consists mainly of some Galilean peasants, some fishermen, a reformed tax collector or two, and even a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, whom Jesus had stopped to heal as he passed through Jericho.

Even the ending of the story is an anticlimax. Jesus enters the city, goes to the Temple, gawks around at all the big buildings and wonderful sights like any tourist, and then simply leaves the city and goes back out to the suburbs in Bethany. Hardly the "triumphal entry" into which pious imagination has transformed it. It's more farce than triumph. Whatever else Jesus may represent, he is not a major power to be reckoned with. Why has Mark deliberately framed his story this way? Why has he not painted a grander picture?

To get at the answer, we need to understand this story in its context, particularly in light of what comes after it in the rest of chapter 11 and in chapters 12-13, which we cannot take the time to read this morning. These chapters provide the lead-in to the Passion story itself. Here we see Jesus first driving out the

moneychangers and animal sellers from the Temple court, and then stationing himself in the temple, the stronghold of ecclesiastical and political power, disputing with the religious authorities and professional power-brokers in the uneasy collaboration between the religious hierarchy and the Roman occupiers. He challenges their right to be the authoritative interpreters of God's law and will for his people. He speaks as though he himself has the inside track on God's will. And he describes in apocalyptic terms the coming destruction of the temple itself and of Jerusalem, none of which is designed to make him popular with either the religious leaders of his own tradition or the Roman political power.

In fact, so threatening does this appear to be, that by the time we get to our second reading, from Mark 14, we see Jesus being targeted by the religious and political leaders for assassination. The stage is set for the comic opera to be transformed into a tragedy of the first order. Mark's account is nothing, if not realistic. What could be more true to life than the dominant group in a society being goaded into a killing rage by perceived threats to their power? History is replete with example after example: The Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising in the 50's and their suppression of the Czech revolution in 1968; the Chinese government's massacre of unarmed students in Tienanmen square in 1989, Ghandi, the architect of Indian independence, murdered by his fellow-Hindus in 1948; J. Edgar Hoover's use of the FBI to mount a vicious smear campaign against Martin Luther King, Jr., in an attempt to discredit him, and with him, the cause of civil rights.

I suggest the answer is the same in all these cases. Some individual or group felt their power, their control, threatened by the ideas and message of another individual or group. And they were determined to hold on to that power at all costs. To do so, meant discrediting or destroying those perceived as threatening their

tenacious but tenuous hold on power. That may appear to be an overly-simplistic answer to what are diverse and complex historical and political issues, but I rather think that at the root of most of history's great issues and dramas, the ultimate causes are the fundamental motivations of the human heart. History is, after all, the story of people, and people across time and culture and geographical boundaries, are pretty much the same in their motivations. Fear, greed, lust for power, selfishness, anger, ambition, hate, love, altruism—all these devices and desires of the human heart are the things that keep historians and novelists, film makers and playwrights, psychologists and pastors in business. They are what life is about, and whether scaled down to individual stories or scaled up to sweeping historical dramas, they are the causes of nearly everything that happens in this world. Those motives of the heart are what make us equally capable of acts of godlike grandeur and savage brutishness.

These motives of the heart, particularly fear, greed, and power go a long way toward explaining Jesus' death. How could anyone who acted with such freedom, such self-assurance, such willingness to proclaim his message of God's kingly rule of freedom so boldly in the face of entrenched power and vested interests be tolerated? Sooner or later, he was bound to run into the implacable opposition of those who stand to lose control, to lose power, to lose influence. He may even in some measure, as such revolutionaries often do, have sought it. If there is any historical value in the recently discovered second-century *Gospel of Judas*, other than documenting the diversity of early Christian practice and thinking, it may be that it shows that Christians were probing this very question even by the second century: to what extent did Jesus help to engineer his own end, believing that he was following God's plan?

As Mark leads us into the Passion story with the poor and the humble acclaiming Jesus as

Messiah, while the elite and the powerful plot to kill him, he precedes the story of Judas's betrayal with a story that allows us to catch a glimpse of an act that is breath-taking in its boldness and exhilarating for the contrasting kind of inner motivation it portrays. By setting this story at the head of the Passion narrative, Mark declares his own understanding of the meaning of Jesus' sufferings and death, and Jesus' own motivation.

Into a dinner party where Jesus is an honored guest, which in Jesus' time and culture would have been a totally male affair, appears a woman. We don't know her name; and probably her name, if it ever was known, was lost by the time Mark himself heard the story. Later tradition, in an effort to fill the gap and make the story more dramatic, identified her with Mary Magdalene, but no evidence exists for that identification. Whoever she was, this anonymous woman gate-crashes this dinner party where Jesus and his disciples are being entertained by religious leaders who are, if not favorable, at least intrigued by Jesus. In Mark's story, she never speaks a word; it's strictly a walk-on part. But what a part! I can imagine that she entered as unobtrusively as possible into the room carrying an alabaster jar of precious perfume, probably myrrh or spikenard, made from expensive resins, reserved for the cosmetic kits of wealthy women or the embalming of the bodies of the rich and powerful. She breaks open the jar, and pours the contents on Jesus head.

What could possess a woman to do such a thing? What could possess a woman to rise above her place and create such a scandal, for that is what her action is— scandalous. The only kind of woman in that culture who would dare enter a male-only affair, and who might have enough money to own such expensive perfume would be either the wealthy wife of a rich and powerful man or a prostitute. The one might possibly do it because of her husband's position and influence; the other because she had no shame and nothing to lose. Either way, it shames

the men gathered there, and, in their eyes, shames no one more than Jesus, their guest.

That's why her action evokes such anger. It's not really the cost of the ointment the men at the dinner are so concerned about. That's what we would call "the presenting issue." But it's not the real issue. They are angry because they feel shamed. They're angry because their guest and leader Jesus is, in their view, humiliated and tainted by this woman's brazen behavior. Can't you just hear the gasps and splutters of outrage? Can't you imagine the woman's hands shaking as she breaks the seal on the bottle and pours the ointment on Jesus, spilling some of it on the floor, no doubt, because she's so nervous and in such a hurry to do what she felt she had to do and be gone? What would cause a woman to act in such an outrageous way?

Jesus knows. She acts this way out of love. She's intelligent enough to have figured it out. She can see where his path is leading. She knows what happens when powerful and fearful men feel that events are slipping out of their control. It doesn't take an Einstein to work out that equation. And she knows also that there's probably nothing she can do to prevent it. But, at the very least, if she cannot protect Jesus from the wrath that will fall on him, she can at least let him know that someone loves him and love always finds a way to confront power, to expose fear, to transcend politics, and cut through self-interest. Love has courage. Love is generous to the point of extravagance. Love will dare all and risk all.

So she does what love drives her to do— perform a small act of kindness, that isn't much in itself, but represents all that is within her power and ability to do. It reveals at the depths of her own heart a different motive than that which drives the men plotting Jesus' death, and different also from those at the dinner party who may be more driven by their ambition self-importance than by love for Jesus. And as the anger of all these affronted men begins to come

crashing down on her head, Jesus, who doesn't appear at all to be shamed by her action, says, *"Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly, I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."*

And so it has. And so it shall, so long as there are a few around to proclaim the good news. And what good news is that? The good news that it is love, after all, that is the ultimate power in the world. Not the power of the gun, not the power of tanks and armies or nuclear missiles. Not the power of Wall Street or the White House. Love is the real power. Love, not Hollywood love, but real, self-giving, risky love that acts with courage and commitment, even when it ends up on a cross. Love that dares to cross barriers of privilege and exclusion that society erects. Love that dares to be extravagantly generous in the face of miserly greed and self-protective prudence. Love that has the courage to act mercifully in the face of a merciless world. Love that cares for the needs of the weak and the helpless in a world that lives by the law of the survival of the strongest. That's the real power that upholds the universe.

And so, even as Jesus begins to walk his lonesome valley of love toward Calvary and the cross, we have this witness of what love can dare and do. *"She has done what she could."* That's all any of us can do, and all any of us are called to do. To do what we can, for love's sake. To confront corrupt or oppressive or arrogant power wherever and however it manifests itself. The very act of confronting that power will be a proclamation of the good news that love, and love alone, is the great beating heart at the center of things.