

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The Problem with Palms

Matthew 16:21-23

Sunday, April 10, 2022

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Next week we will have a big crowd for Easter. Churches always do. The “Chreasters” come out in droves. The Church alumni will be back for homecoming!

Kidding aside, it is a wonderful sight. It is nice to see the church filled to capacity. Don’t you wish it was like that every Sunday?

Churches are always looking for ways to draw a big crowd. Recently a church in Maryland came up with a free car giveaway on a Sunday morning. That’s right. The church bought five cars to hand out at worship services.

Pastor Stephen Chandler of Destiny Church in Columbia, Maryland, said his congregation averages about 1,100 on Sundays. When they announced the car giveaway, their attendance more than doubled. The church had so many people attending they added an extra worship service, and another car to give away.

Actually, it is biblical to use cars as part of worship. In the 2nd chapter of Acts it says that “the disciples were all together in one Accord.” I know. That’s bad.

I must admit that doing such stunts to draw a crowd is enticing. I believe if Pasadena did something like that our worship attendance would increase dramatically. But the problem is that in order to keep crowds coming back you have to keep doing better and better stunts each week. This turns church into a circus and the gospel into a spectacle. It cheapens the ministry of the church.

More than that, once the gimmicks are gone and the novelty fades, so do the crowds. When you stop giving people what they want, they will find someone else who will. The sad truth is many people who will be here on Easter won’t return until Christmas. It’s just the way it is. Crowds are fickle.

Jesus understands this truth better than anyone. If anyone could draw a crowd it was Jesus. When he emerged on the public scene he was an overnight sensation. He could not even find a place to be alone.

When he came into town, the masses lined the streets. He had a gift for preaching. He mesmerized crowds. He also had the gift of healing. Word spread everywhere that this man from Nazareth healed the sick and raised the dead.

But the big crowds did not adore Jesus for long. The tide began to turn against Jesus. The crowds got smaller and his critics got louder. Earlier Jesus’ critics had been afraid to speak out for fear of the masses, but they began to figure out that the fickle public was turning on him. Soon the opposition began to snowball.

The beginning of the end began on Palm Sunday, just a few days before Jesus’ execution. He entered Jerusalem on a donkey with a big crowd shouting “Hosanna!” But soon the cheering stopped and the crowds faded. And many who were waving palm branches for Jesus were nowhere to be found when he got the tar beat out of him. The shouts of Hosanna would give way to “Crucify Him!” Before it was all over Jesus would be brought to his knees under the weight of a cross.

Why did the masses so radically turn against Jesus? Why did the cheering stop and the crowds fade? What did he do or say that caused so many to turn their back on him? Why? Well, you are going to find out this morning.

My colleague and friend Brett Blair reminds us that **one reason why the cheering stopped and the crowds faded is that Jesus began to talk about commitment.**

Close to Palm Sunday, a rich young ruler ran up to Jesus, excited about asking him a question. He said, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” In other words, “How do I get into heaven?” Jesus replied:

“Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

When the young man heard this, he went away sad,

because he had great wealth. -Matthew 19:21-22

The man was stunned by Jesus' response. And so was the crowd who heard it.

I know in my heart when that rich young ruler walked away sorrowfully that day, he was not the only one. I believe many uncommitted people also walked away. Jesus was no longer talking only about grace. He was also talking about the only proper response to God's grace: commitment.

Before Palm Sunday Jesus' message had largely been one of grace. When the 5,000 were hungry he fed them. When they brought their sick to him, he healed them. When a woman is caught in adultery and is about to be stoned, it is Jesus who comes to her rescue and saves her. The message of his ministry is one of grace upon grace.

But after Palm Sunday Jesus was saying, "It's time to stop being entertained by me. and it is time to start following me. The time for proof and wonders is over. The time for commitment is now."

And guess what? The masses didn't like it. The masses of today still don't like the idea of commitment.

This is the problem with palms. Palms are beautiful, and we love to see them waved at Jesus. But when palms are cut from trees, they do not live very long. Soon they begin to wither and fade. It is the same with admirers of Jesus. Their enthusiasm may last for a time, but soon it begins to fade.

Joseph Bella, a sociologist, wrote a book entitled, "Habits of the Heart." In the book he analyzes America, and he says that the symbolic city of America is not New York or Washington, but Las Vegas.

He writes about a survey he did where he asked Americans what they believed. The most consistent result was that they did not want to commit themselves. He writes about doing a survey with a girl named Sheila. She said, "I don't want to commit. I just want to feel good all the time about where I am and what I am doing."

Bella says America is covered in Sheilas. Today, our culture is known for its Sheilism. No one wants to commit to anything. And then folks wonder why they never change, why they never experience life the way they want to. Then folks wonder why they have no joy. Joy can only be found by committing to the love of

Christ and the purpose Christ has for your life.

Unfortunately, this aversion to commitment has also infected the church. One of the biggest issues confronting the church today is not immorality, sin, worship wars, ethical issues, polity, or corruption. The biggest issue confronting the church today is the growing lack of commitment among the followers of Jesus Christ! We have plenty of admirers of Jesus – those who will tip their hat to Jesus from time to time – those who call themselves fans and throw a dollar in the plate twice a year. But Jesus does not want fans; Jesus wants followers. Jesus does not want admirers; Jesus wants disciples.

For many Christians, commitment to Christ and the church is seen as somewhat of a hobby, an option when the mood is right. "If we don't have weekend plans we will do God a favor and make it to worship....If the kids don't have soccer or we don't get a better offer we will sign up to serve some ministry as long as it fits our schedule...And if we have some money left over after our trips and toys, we may give some of it to the church...Oh and pastor I know I haven't been active in the church for awhile and I gave up that Bible study because I lost interest, but I don't feel very close to God right now...I have thirty minutes. Can you fix me in thirty minutes?"

I agree with the late George Buttrick who said, "Sheep are usually not stolen from the flock, they just nibble themselves away."

Too many Christians base their commitment to Christ and the church on whether or not they "feel like it." Can you imagine what would happen if the rest of the world operated that way? Imagine the fireman saying, "I just don't feel like putting out fires today." Imagine the surgeon saying, "I just don't feel like performing surgery today." Imagine the tired mother awakened in the middle of the night by a crying baby saying, "I just don't feel like feeding the baby." The world would come to a screeching halt!

Yet, when it comes to serving the King of Kings, many folks do it only when they feel like it.

So how are you doing? What is your level of commitment? Those of you who joined the church took a vow. You said you would support your church with your prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. How are you doing with that? Christ died for us and set us free! Do we really have to ponder whether or not we should be faithful? Do we really have to give a second

thought to whether or not we should abide in him and grow in our faith?

In order for grace to mean anything there must be a commitment in response to it. Otherwise it is just cheap grace...“I gave you the gift of...what did you do with it? I gave you the gift of...”

The greatest commandment is given: Love God and Love your neighbor; again, a call to commitment. Which leads me to another reason the cheering for Jesus stopped and the crowds faded.

Secondly, the cheering stopped and the crowds faded when Jesus proclaimed that all people are worthy of God’s love.

According to Matthew, right after Jesus’ big parade on Palm Sunday, he went to the temple to do a little spring cleaning on the money changers. Take a look:

Jesus went into the temple courtyard and threw out everyone who was buying and selling there. He overturned the moneychangers’ tables and the chairs of those who sold pigeons. He told them, “Scripture says, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you’re turning it into a gathering place for thieves!”

Blind and lame people came to him in the temple courtyard, and he healed them. -Matthew 21:12-14

Notice that after Jesus cleansed the Temple he then invites in the lame, the poor, the sick, the outcasts of society and heals them. He brings into God’s house what some would call “Riff Raff.”

Jesus was not trying to win friends and influence people. By bringing in these people he was saying all people are loved by God and have access to God. He was showing us what the Kingdom of God is going to be like.

Well, the crowds who followed Jesus did not like that then. And they still don’t like it today.

Recently, I had a conversation with a friend of mine who shared about the time he was so disgusted with a church that he left it. The pastor felt called to lead the church to participate in a homeless ministry... People were so upset that they road him out on a rail.

John 3:16 does not say, “For God so loved the beautiful people” or “the Christians” or “the Republicans” or “Democrats” or “the United Methodists.” It says “For God so loved the WORLD.”

Christians forget that Jesus said the world will know we are his by disciples not by how we worship, not by how we read the bible, not by how we pray, not by the denomination we belong to, but by our love for one another.

I believe another big problem facing the church today is the disparity people experience with Christians who preach love and then act hateful and judgmental. 1st John is clear that it is impossible to love God and hate another person. If we hate another person we need to examine whether we understand the love of God.

Dr. James B. Lemler is an Episcopal priest and he loves to talk about a 2nd grade girl said about his preaching after church one day. about a couple of parents who had gone home from his church and during Sunday lunch were talking about his sermon.

In the midst of their conversation, their second-grade daughter sitting at the table chimed in. “Oh, Father Lemler’s sermons, they’re always the same,” she said, “You know . . . blah, blah, blah, . . . love . . . blah, blah, blah . . . love.” Dr. Lemler said he was amused and thought to himself, “Hey, this little girl really got it . . .

“Over and over again . . . blah, blah, blah, love . . . blah, blah, love . . .” “Blah, blah, blah love . . .”

I hope when I am eulogized that is exactly what people say about my preaching...blah, blah, blah, love....

But would you believe there are some who have a problem with loving all people. That’s why the cheering stopped and crowds faded on Palm Sunday. Jesus opened the doors of the church to everyone. It angered some people then, it still angers some people today.

But that love would soon be demonstrated in a way that would transform the world. And that leads me to the last reason the cheering for Jesus stopped and the crowds faded.

The cheering stopped and the crowds faded because Jesus began to talk about a cross.

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things...and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” -Matthew 16:21-23

Some wanted Jesus to be a revolutionary. Some wanted him to be a great political figure to further their agenda but his whole purpose since the beginning was to show this world that the only thing that can defeat hate, death, sin, evil and darkness is God’s sacrificial and reconciling love.

A few years ago Mark Trotter told a true story about a man in New York City who was kidnapped. His kidnappers called his wife and asked for \$100,000 ransom. She talked them down to \$30,000. The story had a happy ending: the man returned home unharmed, the money was recovered, and the kidnappers were caught and sent to jail.

But, don’t you know the man’s conversation with his wife was very interesting when he found out his wife got him back for a discount? Calvin Trillin wrote about this incident. He imagined out loud what the negotiations must have been like: “\$100,000 for that old guy? You have got to be crazy. Just look at him! Look at that gut! You want \$100,000 for that? You’ve got to be kidding. Give me a break here. \$30,000 is my top offer.”

Mark Trotter concluded his rendition of the story with this thoughtful comment:

I am not sure who you relate to in that story, but I relate to the husband. I’d like to think if I were in a similar situation, there would be people who would spare no expense to get me back. They wouldn’t haggle over the price. They wouldn’t say, ‘Well, let me think about it.’ I like to think that they would say, ‘We’ll do anything for you.’”

Guess what? Christ did. He did everything for you.

“You have been bought and paid for by Christ, so you belong to him — be free now from all these earthly prides and fears.” -1 Corinthians 7:23 TLB

God says that you’re not only accepted, you’re also valuable.

How much do you think you’re worth? I’m not talking about your net worth. I’m talking about your self-worth. Don’t ever confuse your valuables with your value as a person. You can be rich or poor, but it has nothing to do with your value as a person.

You have been bought and paid for by Christ. You belong to Jesus. How much does that make you worth? The cross proves your value. Jesus didn’t die for junk. You are incredibly valuable. Nobody has ever paid a greater price than God paid for you. You are accepted, and you are valuable! Therefore, the most pitiful thing we can do is waste the very life that Jesus died for.

What Christ has done for demands a response – a response of commitment to love as Jesus loved and to serve as Jesus served. Are you an admirer of Jesus or a follower?