

St. Paul's Congregational Church,
March 25, 2018 - Palm Sunday, Year B
"Do It Anyway"
Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Our journey through Lent is nearly complete – today on Palm Sunday we remember the festive processions representing Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem – but there's a sense of foreboding too as we know the hardest part is yet to come. We know that our worship next Sunday will be joyous, the pews filled, great displays of flowers – but for today, we look ahead and we know what's coming the next few days. We will walk with Jesus toward the cross, through the events of Holy Week. And I believe we're called to sit with that for a while – before we can celebrate and really appreciate Easter, we have to go through the darkness of this week, of Maundy Thursday, the pain of Good Friday.

There is good news here, though, and that is we don't go through that pain alone – and if that's the only lesson we take from this journey that's a good one – we don't walk it alone – we have each other, but most of all, we have Jesus walking ahead of us, full of promise, full of a love that we can barely imagine.

As he enters Jerusalem, Jesus turns toward the cross looming in front of him. He knows what's to come – he predicts that Judas will betray him, he knows that those who have promised to stand with him, those who have promised to be with him no matter the suffering, no matter the cost, no matter the cross they must bear, -these are the ones who will forsake him.

And if we are honest, it is not hard for each of us to find our places among those: denying him with Peter, betraying him with Judas for a few extra pieces of silver. It is not hard for us to remember the times we have stood at a distance, quietly watching corporate bottom lines climb alongside the numbers of people living in poverty, listening to governments argue while our sons and daughters are sent off to war. It is not hard to acknowledge the times we have run away from the problems of our time while men and women, children and youth continue to die, because of violence in their schools and neighborhoods and homes. It is not hard to find our place with Peter, hiding somewhere while our Savior hangs on the cross.

It's on Palm Sunday, Passion Sunday, when the shadow of the cross illuminates darkness in our own faith: the places Jesus sometimes leads his disciples – us – places we don't want to go. Today we confront our reluctance to follow Jesus when his path leads us toward the cross.

We remember the events coming even amidst this celebration of Palm Sunday – Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane – “Abba, for you all things are possible: remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” Stunning obedience, isn't that. The fully human Jesus had a choice – just like we have choices – but he didn't turn away, he didn't run away, he didn't save himself – the fully divine Jesus came into Jerusalem on a humble donkey, he continued his journey to the cross.

And there on the cross – as he hung in agony – another stunning event: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Surrounded by his enemies – his followers hiding, standing in the distance, denying him – he asked forgiveness for those we would consider his enemies – what greater love is there than that.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus lived among the enemies of the time – the tax collectors, the lepers, women – all the “other” of the time. He has been instructing his disciples, us, to feed his sheep. He has shown us the way we are to live together as children of God. He knew it wasn't going to end well for him, didn't he – but here's what's struck me this Lenten season, this journey: he did it anyway.

Often when we hear the words, love your enemies it may lead us to think of people we have trouble with: but we're called to go beyond our petty irritations, our own egos, and love all our neighbors as we love ourselves. We're called to build up relationships, not tear them down. We're called to treat each other with a simple dignity just because we're all created in God's image and entitled to respect just because of that. And of course we get worn down by this – loving our enemies isn't easy, even with Jesus as the great model for us all. After all, we're human and it's hard.

But we're called to do it anyway.

What if, what if, we broaden our definition of enemy to include all those powers and principalities that surround us: poverty, sickness, drug addiction, violence, isolation, doing what's right even when it's risky, when it exposes us to the derision of others. Can't we remember some of those times when we stood up for the someone or something because it was the right thing to do; times when we paid a price for the courage of our convictions; times when we stepped up for a stranger in need, defended what was just, embraced a hurting, vulnerable human being? Those times when

we risked our own isolation, our own discomfort, our own pain - but we did it anyway!

The cross confronts us with a choice – to exercise our courage or to run in fear. Honestly, there are too many times when I have found myself standing in the courtyard, listening from a distance while Jesus is condemned; standing so close to undeserved suffering, afraid to speak, afraid to make demands, afraid to do the right thing.

But I'm called, we're all called, to do it anyway.

Jon and Dawn Barnes, with their two children, are UCC Missionaries who served for many years in South Africa – I've been inspired by their dedication to the sick, the poverty stricken, the hungry – living among the poorest of the poor with their two young children. When their term of service ended, they returned to the states for furlough and then returned to Africa, this time in Mozambique.

Dawn's Lenten reflection one year was especially powerful and haunting. She wrote, "Lent, for me this year, has been about reflection and taking the time for insight. And I have found a bit of a void as I have searched and dug.

"We have had several power outages in the last month so we have several candles that we keep within reach for night-time use. This particular candle was given to me by my mother-in-law, Sue, before we left the USA for Mozambique. It traveled safely in one of our suitcases all the way here and has sat on my bedside table for a year. In a storm one night, the lamp fell on it and broke it. I decided I love the smell of the candle so much that I would save it, even though the glass was broken. I put it in our bathroom, safe from the reach of our kids. Then last week as we were getting ready for bed the power went off and I lit this candle to take a shower. When I got out of the shower I found...wax all poured out and this jagged piece of glass jutting out, yet the candle still burned bright giving off this luxurious smell. As I have pondered this sight for over week now I have decided that I am going to leave this candle just where it is as a reminder. Through the storms, through the pouring out, through the jagged roughness....the light remains. And right now in my life I need this reminder. Do you think Jesus did some of this same pondering so long ago during these same days? I wonder what he saw and/or used as a reminder? I wonder how he saw the light still burning amongst the struggles he was facing? I wonder.....How must Jesus have felt as his heart and soul were broken as he was facing his own death. I wonder..."

The experience in Mozambique was hard for the Barnes family – the poverty and hardships were even more difficult than they were in South Africa – you can hear Dawn’s weariness in her writing.

Here’s the thing though: Jon and Dawn and their family could have left Mozambique at any time – they had a choice - they could walk away from those powers and principalities that surrounded them at any time and continued their ministry in another place, in another arena, before their term of service was over. But they didn’t. They’ll did it anyway. They continued their AIDS ministry, their ministry of education, their ministry of bring the good news of God’s love to a country still recovering from a terrible civil war, to a country among the poorest in the world.

The cross confronted them with a choice – to stay close to people’s suffering or stand at a distance. They didn’t leave. They did it anyway.

How can we, who live in such comfort, such affluence, such safety, do any less? What are the enemies, the powers and principalities, we’re called to love, to forgive, to overcome - and move toward the light? What choice will we make?

The story of Holy Week beginning with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the cross, to the festival of Easter Sunday is not a story about something that happened once, long ago, and never again. Jesus is with those who suffer and he also understands our human responses, our human experience because he has shared it.

How then will we, as people of faith, respond? What choice will we make: to exercise our courage or to run in fear, to stay in the distance? Or will we stand and deliver the good news of God’s justice, God’s love? May our courage grow a little deeper, our conviction a little stronger, our resolve a little deeper for the next time God calls us toward the cross.
Amen.