

Sunday, April 12, 2020

Billy Graham would begin a sermon on Palm Sunday by telling the story about a little boy who was very excited that the circus was coming to town. In that day it cost a dollar to get a seat under the "Big Top" to watch the clowns, elephants and high wire acts etc. The father of the youth said that Timmy would have to do chores around the house in order to receive the required admission price. Timmy worked for a week to finally earn enough money. When the circus arrived, Timmy sat on the Main Street curb to watch the parade go by. He saw elephants, jugglers, lions and all manner of creatures and entertainers. At the end of the parade a clown passed by and Timmy gave him the hard-earned dollar bill. Timmy returned home eager to share his wonderful experiences with his dad. His father was both amused and saddened by the report. His words continue to haunt me to this day relative to the Christian journey: "Son ---you went to go see the circus but all you saw was the parade!"

The metaphor of being enamored of the parade without stepping into the tent is comic, tragic and very descriptive of many religious people. The crowds on Passover week, prior to the crucifixion and Easter, wanted a king who would eradicate Roman rule just like the Maccabees defeated their oppressors 150 years earlier. They were convinced that Jesus would be a monarch modeled after king David. Jesus the Christ would come instead to teach us about what WE need to do to bring about the kingdom of God. The prophets in the Hebrew Bible preached that same message: "Repent---take care of the poor, lost and lonely in your midst and stop worshipping idols!" In truth, respected Hebrew Bible scholars have taught me that Jesus did not teach anything that was not already in the Canon of His day: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself." That's what it means to step inside the tent of the disciple's journey. The people of Israel didn't really have much appreciation for the prophets that the Lord sent them earlier. That's why Jesus wept when He arrived at the city gates of Jerusalem. He would talk about how they "kill the prophets." It is human nature as C.S. Lewis writes: "we are looking for a jolly grandfather figure like Santa Claus who will give us whatever we ask for and a good time to be had by all. That is not the world or the God that we get in Jesus the Christ."

When Jesus paraded down the Jerusalem streets, the crowds cried out "Hosanna--Save us!" To this day many of us still need to be saved from ourselves and the idols and egos we worship. Our Lord wants us to participate in the process. In the novel "The Robe" written by Lloyd C. Douglas, a young Roman named Marcellus is captivated by the Christian message. He writes to his fiancé (Diana) to that effect. She is cordial in her response but asks the question: "We don't really have to do anything about it, do we?" Paul gives us some really good practical advice about what we do need to do. Writing in Philippians he would give us what is called the Kenotic message: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit but in humility consider others better than yourselves." In the Epistle pericope for this Sunday, he would talk about an attitude like Christ "who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God as

something to be grasped but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” The message of the cross involves the Lord reaching down to draw us to HIM. What we get to “do about it” Diana, is to love one another like Jesus the Christ did as he washed his disciple’s feet on Maundy Thursday. Only by losing ourselves in the service to others do we find our “true selves.” A famous Jesuit priest once wrote that “the most selfish thing we can do is to be unselfish.” While this paradox seems inscrutable, anyone who has shot a basketball or played tennis really well knows, “self-consciousness can inhibit performance. When we offer kindness to another person, it is in that moment and later, we feel something that transcends human understanding. It is in these moments that we connect with the Divine.

Another key point to the Palm Sunday parade and the Good Friday cross involves what Charles Dickens would account as the “vicissitudes of life.” Sometimes it seems that we are “on top of the world” and we enjoy the adulations of others and the success. Other times we feel like even our family dog doesn’t like us. Following Jesus, the Christ “into the tent” of discipleship is a roller coaster ride. Sometimes we feel like we are parading through the streets of Jerusalem accompanied by cheers of approval. Other times, we are feeling the hints of a crucifixion. “Life is difficult,” to quote the Buddha and Scott Peck. If we remember that we belong to Jesus, and He is with us either way, we live in an eternal presence in the now. We experience heaven and oneness with our TRUE SELF, which is also the Christ.

In the first church I served in Tallahassee, I was driving down the road with a member of my search committee (I will call him Todd.) We made note of Todd’s son Jay jogging down the road. Todd was beaming with pride. His son was in the coveted fraternity at FSU. He was an athlete and a participant in Campus Crusade. When we got back to Todd’s house, a call came from the police. Jay had stopped at a local park and was invited to finish a keg that had been left over from merriment the night before. We got to go to the station bailing Jay out for drinking at a public park! This is what Dickens would call the vicissitudes of the human condition. Our perfect son ends up in police custody! It seems we live somewhere between Palm Sunday and the Cross at any given moment in our lives. But if we enter the “tent of the presence” and we allow Jesus to reside in the empty chair of our home or workplace, “all will be well with our souls and whatever we face, we do not face it alone. Our Lord Christ gives peace---not as the world gives it.” This is a peace beyond human understanding. It is available to all us who step into the tent! Enjoy the Palm Sunday parade but don’t forget to bring Christ with you into the tent.

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