

“The Two Minds of Jesus”

Mark 14:32-42

Palm/Passion Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville

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My parents like to tell the story about one of my earliest days in a worship service at church.

I was maybe two or three years old.

I have no memory of the events, but my parents tell me I did it.

What did I do?

We were visiting my grandparents, it was over the weekend, we went to their small, Methodist church on Sunday.

I don't know why I wasn't put in the nursery.

Maybe there was no nursery.

All I know is that my parents had me with them in worship, in the very last row of pews...just in case they needed to make a quick getaway with me.

And I was doing fine, behaving well.

Then a soloist stood up to sing.

So my parents stood me up on the pew so I could see.

And the soprano started singing, and for 10, maybe 15 seconds, I just stared at her. Then I THREW my arms up into the air. I wasn't waving my arms, I wasn't shouting “Amen.”

What I started shouting was:

“STOP! STOP!”

Now...what happened next?

You know what happened next.

My parents whisked me out of that sanctuary as quickly as they could.

But afterward, so I'm told, my grandfather found the whole thing amusing. Because even though getting me out of there was, he conceded, the right thing to do, my grandfather also commented on how OFF-KEY and awful that soloist really was—and how he wished my parents would have taken HIM out of the sanctuary along with me...

Was it appropriate for me to shout STOP?
Of course not. Completely inappropriate.
But...maybe a little appropriate.

One could say that at least my grandfather was of two minds about what I did in church that day.

Have you ever been of two minds about something before?
Of course you have.
All of us have.

In fact, there is a day in our church year, every year, when I feel this way.

That day is today.
Today is a day when I feel split. Torn.
Divided in heart and spirit.

Because Palm Sunday is not an easy day to figure out.

On the one hand, it's a day of celebration, right?
A day for children to sing and process with palm branches.
A day when we hear about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

It's a day of joy. A day of Hosanna. A day of hope.

**That's what Palm Sunday is all about.
Is that what Palm Sunday is all about?**

In the liturgical calendar, as many of you may know, Palm Sunday is also known as Passion Sunday.

The Passion of Jesus, the suffering of Jesus—
that too is remembered and recognized today.

You heard it in our second text:

“He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death...’”

Think about those two texts.
They do not easily align with one another.
In fact, they sound diametrically opposed to each other.

Almost like Palm Sunday...is contradicting itself.

That's what I want to think about with you this morning.
We are finishing our sermon series, The Fabric of Faith, today.
And our topic this morning is faith...**as contradiction.**

Being of two minds...about our faith, within our faith.

Do you know anything about this?
Do you know anything about faith...
not as clarity, not as consistency, not as coherence...
but faith as contradiction?

Sam Wells used to serve as the Dean of the Chapel at Duke. Wells is from England, and he says that when he began working at Duke, he came across a Tenebrae service for the first time in his life.

Duke would hold its Tenebrae service on Good Friday evening.

It was a service in which the sanctuary lights were gradually dimmed after each scripture passage was read, until finally—all the lights were out, and 1,300 people would listen in darkness and silence as the tower bell tolled 39 times.

At that point, a candle was brought forward, by an acolyte, from the back of the sanctuary to the front. The candle symbolized that even in the midst of Good Friday darkness, God's light was present.

But after experiencing the service for the first time, Wells began to question the appropriateness of that Good Friday candle.

He writes that the candle could “represent a...reluctance to stay with the unresolved, tragic, and terrifying experience” that Jesus walked through after he entered Jerusalem long ago.

Should they keep the candle, or not?

“This liturgical question,” he says, “goes right to the heart of [our faith.] Was the cross an agonizing, horrifying, but ultimately successful and triumphant enterprise?”

“Or was it...the tragic, cruel, and ugly epitome of the world's failure to embrace the utter goodness of God...an ending so shameful...that it exposes the church's deepest...fears about the absence...or non-existence of God?”

“If it was the former,” Wells concludes, then the candle is appropriate.

“If it was the latter, the candle is a sign of our denial of the cost, risk, and full horror of the cross, a hasty and perhaps shallow attempt to...rush to a happy ending.”¹

I don't know what Sam Wells did with that candle.
But I do know about the temptation to RUSH...

To rush through this sad and sacred week.
To rush onward to Easter.
To rush to a happy ending (donuts in between services next
Sunday!)

Or if not a happy ending, then at least a satisfying one.

We all like satisfying endings, don't we?
In the stories that we tell.
In the movies we see.

Take Charles Dickens' novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

The main character, Sydney Carton, has lived a life of dissipation and failure until one day, he sees an opportunity for redemption.

He takes the place of a noble, good-hearted family man who's scheduled for the guillotine. In the 1935 movie version, Carton is played by Ronald Colman—brave, handsome—his final words are eloquent and make all the sense in the world:

¹ I am indebted to Sam Wells' sermon, "Preaching Crucifixion," in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2016, for this story.

“It is a far, far better thing that I do...”²

There’s something appealing that ending.

And we want the same for our own stories.

In the narratives we provide for our lives, we want consistency and coherence and moral clarity...

What about the narrative we give to Jesus’ life?

Because according to Mark, it’s a narrative that takes us right into faith...as contradiction!

On the one hand, Jesus told his disciples on three separate occasions that he needed to suffer and be killed and on the third day rise again.

It’s in Mark 8:31, Mark 9:30, Mark 10:33.

As if everything is going to happen just like it’s supposed to happen.

Then we get to Gethsemane.

On the last night of his life, Jesus prayed:

“Abba, Father, for you all things are possible: remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want but what you want.”

He prayed like maybe it was NOT supposed to happen the way that Jesus said it would happen! Like when push came to shove, Jesus did NOT want it all to happen the way he told his disciples it would happen.

² I am indebted to a Palm Sunday sermon by the Rev. Amy Miracle for this reference to “A Tale of Two Cities.”

And I find that to be one of the most comforting passages in scripture.

In the Garden, Jesus wants to take it all back.

Jesus was of two minds about his faith, just like you and I can be of two minds about our faith.

Do you know anything about faith...

not as consistency, not as clarity,
but faith as contradiction?

The writer Dan Wakefield died earlier this month.

Wakefield was a novelist who also wrote about his journey from early Christian upbringing—he was a Presbyterian who became Baptist—and then away from the faith—to a life of professional success, as well as addiction to alcohol—and then, in mid-life, back to faith.

One of the people he turned to for guidance when he returned to the church was the theologian, Henri Nouwen. Dan Wakefield read Nouwen's book, "Reaching Out," in which Nouwen writes:

"...it would be just another illusion to believe that reaching out to God will free us from pain and suffering. Often, indeed, it will take us where we rather would not go. But we know that without going there we will not find our life."

Wakefield then recalled how he was thrilled to meet Henri Nouwen on one occasion. Over lunch, he told Nouwen how much he appreciated his writings and his work, but that he was, he admitted, a bit "dismayed" to read of Nouwen's own anguish in his faith.

Wakefield says that it made him wonder “what chance a neophyte [like me] had in pursuit of the spiritual, when someone as advanced as Father Nouwen experienced anguish and confusion in his relation to God.”

Nouwen replied that contrary to what many people may think, “Christianity is not for getting your life together!”

Nouwen’s comment left a mark on Wakefield.

“I learned that belief in God,” he said, “does not depend on how well things are going, that faith and prayer and good works do not necessarily have any correlation to earthly reward or even tranquility, no matter how much we wish they would...”

“I believe in God [because in God], ‘service is perfect freedom...’”

“I believe in God,” he said, “because the gift of faith has been given to me...”³

Just like the gift of faith,
no matter how full or fragile it feels,
has been given to each of you.

What will we do with that gift?
Will we, as Nouwen suggested, let it take us to places we would rather NOT go?

Forgiving those we don’t want to forgive?
Loving those we would rather not love?

³ Dan Wakefield, “Returning to Church,” *The New York Times*, December 22, 1985.

Making our goal not our personal comfort or success, but sacrifice, dying to self, so that we might rise to a new and different way of life?

On any given day, I am of two minds about my answer.

Maybe the same is true for you.

If it is, don't be afraid.

In Gethsemane, Jesus was of two minds about what to do with his faith.

But the love of God held on to Jesus.

Even when he was split, divided, torn...facing monumental contradictions, the love of God saw him through.

The love of God will do the same thing for you...

Amen.