

Earthtones: The Landscape of Lent – Palms

4/13/14

Matthew 21:1-11, 26:14-16

Rev. Jana Purkis-Brash delivered this message on Sunday, April 13, 2014 at Princeton United Methodist Church.

This morning we are focused on palms; not the ones we hold in our hands; the ones that are hands! Hands **are** amazing things. Anatomy tells us that each hand is comprised of:

- 29 bones
- 123 ligaments
- 34 muscles
- 48 named nerves
- 30 named arteries

Hands can hold. Hands can bless. Hands can make a fist to fight. Hands can comfort. Hands can heal. Hands can shake to close a deal. One of the first things new parents check on their babies is their hands. Prenatal ultrasound confirms that babies discover their hands in the womb and often suck their thumbs. We depend on hands for most everything we do, from brushing our teeth, combing our hair, to eating, drinking, driving, tucking kids into bed, and wielding the remote.

The story of Holy Week can be summarized by hands--palms: palms that waved branches, palms that exchanged coins, and palms that were pierced with nails. The week ahead is one we remember beginning today with praise, descending to betrayal, and ending with death.

The first palms of the week are the palms of praise. All four gospel writers recall the same scene. Jesus makes a dramatic entry into Jerusalem, the hotbed of opposition to his message. He does not enter under cover of night, but in the brightness of the day, riding a donkey in fulfillment of ancient prophecies about the Messiah. People who followed him from Galilee cut branches from the trees, threw their coats on the ground to approximate a makeshift red carpet, and then they sang, shouted, and celebrated.

Who were the ones with the palms in their palms? The disciples, to be sure. Mary, Martha, and the recently resurrected Lazarus? No doubt. But maybe there were others whose own hands had been touched by the man from Nazareth:

- Peter's mother-in-law, who was lifted up from her sick bed. (Mt 8:15)
- The woman with the flow of blood, who reached through the crowd and touched the hem of Jesus' robe. (Mt.9:21)
- The daughter of the leader of the synagogue whose hand Jesus took to lift her up. (Mt 9:25)
- The man with the withered hand. (Mt 12:13)
- The leper whom Jesus touched. (Mk 1:41)
- The blind man (Mk 8:23)
- The boy with convulsions (Mk 9:27)

We join them today, 2000 years later, we who have been touched in some way by that same man from Nazareth. But our attempt at celebrating Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is more restrained because we know how this week will end. On Friday night we will be walking out of this sanctuary

in silence acutely aware of Jesus' crucifixion and death. So, in a way, there hangs over this morning, even with the songs of triumph and waving of palms, a sense of impending doom.

The vast majority of Palm Sunday celebrators accompanying Jesus to Jerusalem had no sense of that, however. They thought that Jesus would be as enthusiastically welcomed to Jerusalem by the religious leaders as he was by them. A few of the disciples, like Thomas, had a sense that things might turn violent, but by and large, the crowd regarded the day as one of unbridled hope. Nevertheless, behind closed doors inside the city, nervous Pharisees and Sadducees were plotting how to get rid of Jesus. They first thought about capturing him in secret and killing him, but Caiaphas the high priest was afraid that the people supporting Jesus would cause a riot during the Passover, so that plan was abandoned. When we read the 26th chapter of Matthew it seems like religious enemies of Jesus are stymied. Until they are paid a visit by Judas Iscariot.

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

Matthew 26:14-16

Thirty pieces of silver was the traditional price for the selling of a slave, according to Jewish law. It is not clear whether that price was meant to reflect the leaders' understanding of the price for Jesus, or the price of Judas, who himself became a slave to evil while Jesus became a slave to love. From palm to palm coins were passed. Taken from the Temple Treasury, given to the chief priest,

placed in Judas' palm, thirty coins became the representation of betrayal.

Much has been written speculating about Judas' motivation for the betrayal, everything from simple selfish greed to a more complicated explanation that views Judas as forcing Jesus into a place where he would have to claim his Kingdom and his power. The motivation will forever elude us. But the part betrayal plays in the story of salvation does not.

Betrayal, denial, judgment, and violence fill the hours of the days between Palm Sunday and the day of Resurrection. And in so many ways the betrayal of Jesus did not end with Judas. Jesus is betrayed whenever those who claim his name fail to live consistently and proactively in love.

You see, Jesus was hated by the religious hard-liners because he loved the people whom they rejected: tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans, Gentiles, lepers, and at times, even women. He was hated because he placed compassion and love above laws and traditions that kept such people marginalized, isolated, and demeaned.

We who are called to have the mind and spirit of Jesus betray him when we allow our own self-interest, our own prejudices, our own tacit acceptance of the status quo to limit the ways in which we could help make God's kingdom a reality here on earth, as it is in heaven.

We betray Jesus when we see people in need and close our hearts against them.

We betray Jesus when we gather wealth (coins) into our own hands while others live in hunger and poverty.

We betray Jesus when we know what he would do but are afraid to do it.

We betray Jesus when we ignore the love he insisted upon and embrace hate.

Palms of praise easily can become palms of betrayal. And because of that, because of our human insistence on hating, hurting, and hoarding, Jesus opens his own palms in love and dies even while pleading for humanity, "Forgive them, Father, they don't know what they are doing."

Sometimes, I think we do know what we are doing, or failing to do. But the amazing thing about the love of God in Jesus is that when we fess up to our sin and confess it, we are embraced by the grace that was given to us through those palms.

Palms of praise, palms of betrayal, palms of loving grace: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," and may those who go in his name be a blessing as well.

Today as you leave worship you will be given a palm of praise, receive it and carry it remembering that we are called to praise the living Christ. Today you will also be given a coin, receive it and carry it reflecting on how you betray Christ. Journey through this week anticipating the pitcher and basin, the bread, the cup, nails and finally resurrection celebration. In this week, fully prepare to meet the risen Christ.