

“Fickle Folks”

Mark 11:1-11

My grandma was very active in the ministry of the congregation I grew up in. Like many grandmas in this congregation, she was a great role model for her grandchildren. When she would get frustrated with another member in the congregation she would sometimes refer to them as “fickle.” Have you ever been called fickle? If you have, you probably didn’t like it, even though, if you’re like me, you may not know what it means because it is not a word our generation tends to use.

Roget’s Thesaurus gives synonyms for the word “fickle” like “indecisive; unstable; unreliable; irresponsible; vacillating.” So no one would want to be called “fickle”, but we’ve all been called worse names.

Every year about this time, as we read of the events of the last week of Jesus’ earthly life, we cannot help but be struck by the fickleness of people. Here we have Palm Sunday with great crowds shouting their lungs out: “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!” And yet, just days later, those same lungs were out there shouting, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” What could be more fickle than that?

But it’s really not so surprising. What caused fickleness in people back then are some of the same causes of fickleness in us today. Which procession do we choose to participate in? Today we were in the Jesus procession, waving our palm

leaves and joining those who were on the east side of Jerusalem where Jesus had sent his disciples to get a donkey.

Could that donkey have been a part of Jesus problem? After all, we think of a majestic king coming in triumph borne on the back of a fine, strong, snorting stallion, not a lowly donkey. Donkeys are for plowing and pulling wagons, not triumphal processions. How much respect could we have for a king who uses a donkey instead of a horse? At least, that's the way we think.

But then kings rode on horseback when they were going to war. Kings that come in peace rode on a donkey. Most of the people who saw Jesus that day would have understood the symbolism. But some were well aware of the procession on the west side of the city and were looking for a different kind of king.

The procession of Roman governor Pontius Pilate and his accompanying military force coming into the city from the west provided the military deterrent during the Passover Festival when the city filled to over-capacity with Jewish pilgrims. According to the first century historian, Josephus, when Pilate first brought Roman troops to Jerusalem a few years earlier, he very much angered the Jews by allowing the troops to bring military standards and busts of the emperor into Jerusalem by night and set them up in the temple. A massive protest forced the removal of the standard, but only after the Jews used tactics of non-violent mass resistance, lying down and baring their necks, when Pilate's soldiers, swords in hand, surrounded and attempted to disperse them. Pilate was not a popular guy

among the Jews.

Some of the Jews, especially the group known as Zealots were hoping for a warrior messiah who would gather the faithful to do battle with the hated Roman legions and drive them from the land. Judas was a Zealot who betrays Jesus precisely because he does not fit the image of the Messiah that Zealots had in mind.

So when we're waving these palm branches around, we need to remember there were two processions coming into Jerusalem. We have to be careful not to miss that Jesus was intentionally setting up a comparison between the violent and powerful procession of the empire and the peace and grace-filled procession of the kingdom of God. Those who are putting their cloaks on the road on the east side of the city would have remembered the words of the prophet Zechariah: a king coming into Jerusalem with shouts of joy from the people, but humble and riding on a donkey. Zechariah prophesies a king who is not a conquering hero using weapons of mass destruction, but one who will break the power of military might with humility, justice, and peace for all nations.

The Jesus procession is an intentional parable and statement of contrast. Pilate's procession embodied power, violence, and the glory of the empire that ruled the world. The Jesus procession embodied the kind of kingdom that God was ushering in through Jesus' ministry of healing, his message of good news for the poor and outcast, and ultimately, his sacrificial death on a Roman cross.

The Jesus procession is more popular among the people today, but as we make our way through Holy Week, the people are fickle. Monday, the day after Jesus' triumphal ride, he came into the temple and made a wreck of the place. The religious establishment had put together a right thriving business in the sale of birds and animals that could be used for a worshiper's sacrifice. The practice had no doubt begun with the highest of motives – after all, people who had traveled many miles might appreciate not having to carry their sacrifices with them, especially knowing those sacrifices would have to be perfect in every way when presented to the priests. That would have been difficult after transporting birds and animals over long distances. Unfortunately, greed got the better of those religious folks who had started their service with such high motives, and the result was that worshipers were getting royally ripped off when they would come to make their purchases. Jesus would not stand for something like that happening in God's house so he put a stop to it. He threw the bums out.

On Monday, Jesus turns over the tables in the temple and the people who had shouted "Hosanna" today find themselves very quiet tomorrow as Jesus challenges the way they practice their religion and the fickle people didn't like that very much.

On Tuesday, Jesus and his friends were back in the temple and saw a poor widow coming in and making her offering. It wasn't much of an offering, just two little coins that today wouldn't even be worth a penny. Lots of others were making

their offering too, and in much more substantial amounts, but this woman caught Jesus' attention. He told his friends that this poor widow had given a greater offering than even those who were giving fabulous sums. His point was that most of the offerings were not that big a deal because they were being given out of what people really did not need. They were giving the leftovers. But this woman was giving sacrificially, because she was giving everything she had.

Now, the Lord was not trying to say that this should be the universal standard for offerings. After all, the standard had been set centuries before. It was the tithe, the first tenth of all income, and that same standard is the one we have today. What Jesus wanted to convey was that, for our faith walk to be what it ought to be, a real commitment is required. It cannot be something that is half-hearted or taken lightly or something to be taken care of once everything else is done. On our faith walk, we have to be willing to make sacrifices. Because we don't like making sacrifices, more than a few "Hosannas!" would fall silent on Tuesday and the words "Crucify Him" begin to form. Fickle folks!

Fickle folks - folks who turned against Jesus when they found he would not lead them where they wanted to go. Folks who turned against him when they found his faith walk was not theirs – his via dolorosa was not theirs. Folks who turned against him when he called for real commitment. folks who were waving palm leaves on Sunday were gone by Friday, having abandoned Jesus to the powers of the temple and the empire. They chose self-preservation over the way of

Jesus. It was that way 2,000 years ago and it has been that way ever since.

The question we have to ask on Palm Sunday is whether we do the same thing when following Christ becomes inconvenient or even impossible, whether it be in school, in the workplace, or even at home. Are we really committed to following the self-sacrificial way of the cross in our school relationships, in our workplace relationships, in our family relationships?

Fickle folks - indecisive, unstable, unreliable, vacillating. Such a change between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Hard to imagine? Not really. After all, they were just like us, and our tendency would have been to do the same thing. So as we make this pilgrimage through our 4th graders celebrating their first communion on Maundy Thursday, through our noon community *tre-ore* worship on Good Friday, through the darkness of our Good Friday Tenenbrae worship in the evening, through the Easter Vigil of Saturday, we praise God that our “fickleness” is not the end of the story – that our shouts of “Hosanna” becoming shouts of “Crucify Him” was not the end of the story.

Easter came, and with it the promise of new life in Christ. By the power of the Risen Lord, fickle folks become faithful folks.

May the peace of God . . .

#346 - Ride On, Ride On in Majesty!

Contemporary - Lord, I Lift Your Name on High