



"If These Were Silent, the Stones Would Shout Out"

Scripture – Luke 19:28-40

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, April 10, 2022

If I asked you to choose your favorite parade, which one would win? The Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade? The Tournament of Roses? New York City Gay Pride? Fourth of July? St. Patrick's Day?

Several years ago, Camilla and I attended the Village Halloween Parade in Lower Manhattan. The sidewalks were jammed with more than one million people. We were body to body and could barely move. Social distancing? Nobody in that crowd ever heard about it.

All of us were straining our necks to see those marching in the parade. These were people who had maxed out their creativity designing costumes that were ghoulish, eccentric, and unusually *creepy*! But it was all in fun and everyone was in a festive mood. Smiles were everywhere and there was an abundance of laughter.

Most parades are festive and entertaining, but some are not so light and amusing. In Northern Ireland there are hundreds of parades between Easter and July 12th. Most of these are Protestants marching through Catholic neighborhoods, usually to commemorate some past battle. As you would expect, most of these parades create a very tense atmosphere. Personally, I would not label them parades. I would call them marches.

Each year on Palm Sunday, Christian churches around the globe focus on the day Jesus processed into Jerusalem to the shouts of his supporters. Many think of what happened on that first Palm Sunday as a parade, but I would not call it that. It was a carefully calculated protest.

Jesus intentionally orchestrated his entry to take place a handful of days before the Passover Feast. Each year on this occasion, pilgrims swelled the city's population to five times its normal size. Jesus selected this precise moment because it was the religious festival when Jews celebrated God liberating them from slavery in Egypt centuries earlier. In the time of Jesus, Pharaoh was a distant memory, but they had a new malevolent tyrant – Caesar. Jesus and his people lived under the harsh Roman military occupation and, like their ancestors, dreamt of liberation. The people longed for the Messiah to drive out the Romans, to dethrone Caesar, and to become a new king – a just king, a virtuous king, a king who cared about people.

To squelch such national aspirations, Pilate led a regiment of armed soldiers from Caesarea Maritima on the coast of the Mediterranean into Jerusalem. This was to establish a heavier than usual military presence. In addition to their weapons, the soldiers waved banners of the empire. Entering from the opposite side of the city, down the Mount of Olives and up into the city, the followers of Jesus came – no weapons, and waving palm branches. Pilate came to guarantee that talk of freedom did not get out of hand and ignite an uprising. Jesus came to liberate the people.

The Palm Sunday processional was no holiday parade. It was a resistance movement.

Protest marches often have memorable slogans. The Civil Rights movement will be remembered for “We shall overcome” and “I have a dream.”

The slogans used by the followers of Jesus were “Hosanna” which means “Save us,” and “Son of David” and “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” Each of these announced their allegiance not to Caesar, but to Jesus; not to the pagan emperor, but to their true king; not to Rome, but to the Kingdom of God. It was a dangerous display of opposition to the emperor.

This is why the Pharisees rush to Jesus and shout at him: “Teacher, order your disciples to stop!” They fear what will happen if Pilate is provoked. The Romans would relish an opportunity to set an example of what happens if someone incites a crowd with talk of revolution. The way of the oppressor is to suffocate all resistance; but people will forfeit their lives for justice and freedom. You only need to look to the American Revolution or contemporary Ukraine to know this is true.

Jesus snickers at the Pharisees’ demand to silence his followers. He responds, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

What did Jesus mean? Here’s what I think: Truth can only be muffled for so long. The desire for freedom will not vanish simply because someone demands that lips be sealed. The yearning for justice cannot be squelched simply because speech is threatened. The longing for peace will not evaporate simply because people hold their tongue. Hope will not die out simply because mouths are muted. “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Ironically, later in the week, the disciples WILL lose their voice. Afraid for their lives, they will go mum. But they will not remain silent for long. They will find their voice and they will speak boldly *about* Christ and they will spread love as Christ did.

Today’s story is about Jesus leaving the safe sanctuary of Bethany and entering the hostile confines of Jerusalem; but it’s about more than that. Today’s story is about Jesus’ loyal followers escorting him into the Holy City; but it’s about more than that. Today’s story is about Jesus demonstrating courage in the face of death; but it’s about more than that. Today’s story is about love heading to where hate hangs out. It is about taking light to places shrouded in darkness. It is about showing up with compassion in places of pain. It’s about followers of Jesus carrying on his ministry after he’s gone by becoming vessels of God’s love to heal the world.

A few years ago, Deirdre Sullivan did an essay for NPR's "All Things Considered" about the important lesson her father taught her. Her father said, "Always go to the funeral."

She was 16 years old and she was trying to avoid going to the visitation for Miss Emerson, who had been her fifth grade math teacher. She did not want to go, but her father was unequivocal. "Dee," he said, "You're going. Always go to the funeral. Do it for the family."

Her dad waited in the car while she went in. You might think, it probably wasn't as bad as she thought it would be and you are right. It was worse than she thought it would be.

She says, "I was the only kid there. When the condolence line deposited me in front of Miss Emerson's shell-shocked parents, I stammered out, "Sorry about all this," and stalked away. But, for that deeply weird expression of sympathy delivered 20 years ago, Miss Emerson's mother still remembers my name and always says hello with tearing eyes."

That was the first time she went un-chaperoned, but her parents had been taking her to funerals and visitations for several years. By the time she was 16, she had been to five or six funerals. She remembers two things about those experiences: bottomless dishes of free mints and her father saying on the ride home, "Always go to the funeral."

It sounds simple — when someone dies, get in your car and go to the visitation or the funeral. But a personal philosophy of going to funerals means more than that.

She says, "Always go to the funeral" means to do the right thing when you really, really don't feel like it. Do the things that represent an inconvenience to yourself, but mean the world to the other guy. She says, "In my life, the daily battle hasn't been good versus evil. It's hardly so epic. Most days, my real battle is doing good versus doing nothing."

She says, "In going to funerals, I've come to believe that while I wait to make a grand heroic gesture, I should just stick to the small inconveniences that let me share in life's inevitable, occasional calamity."

And then, Sullivan concludes with this: "On a cold April night three years ago, my father died a quiet death. His funeral was on a Wednesday, the middle of the workweek. I had been numb for days. At one point during the funeral, I turned and looked back at the folks in the church. The memory of it still takes my breath away. The most human, powerful, and humbling thing I've ever seen was a church at three o'clock on a Wednesday full of inconvenienced people."¹

Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice. Surely we can be inconvenienced from time to time.

There may come a day when you are called upon to do something grand and heroic and courageous. In the meantime, do the small things, the inconvenient things, the things that add up and make a difference.

NOTE

1. Deirdre Sullivan, "Always Go to The Funeral," NPR: All Things Considered, August 8, 2005.