

Today, as we begin what is known as Holy week, we celebrate Palm Sunday. The text for today is normally a New Testament about Jesus' procession into Jerusalem. You might recall how the story begins, as Jesus instructs two of his disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey..." Once the donkey is secured by the disciples, Jesus rides on its back into town as the gathered crowd lay palms and garments and shout, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Yet, on our first Palm Sunday together, we will continue our walk through the Beatitudes, a walk that actually skips one of the Beatitudes that I have reserved for Easter morning. Let's recap the Beatitudes from Matthew's Gospel...

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.
- Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy...
- And today we skip the next Beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart...", to explore...
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Yes, our Gospel reading this morning is, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

This is the Living Word of God... Thanks be to God.

Let me make a confession, as I planned this sermon series, and realized that I had to place this Beatitude on this particular Sunday, it seemed odd at first. The pageantry of Palm Sunday evokes images of a parade and feelings of excitement and anticipation. The crowd who spread their garments on the road and waved their palm branches as Jesus entered Jerusalem had gathered for the Passover Feast. The gathered crowd would have been particularly conscious of God, as the One who liberates God's people from oppression, for they wanted Jesus to become a King, like the One prophesied by the prophets. The One who would re-establish the kingdom of David and usher in justice and peace for the Jews. Roman oppression would be overthrown, for Jesus would be King not Cesar!

Yet, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, not on a war chariot drawn by majestic horses. Jesus entered meekly; not shouting victory chants or raising his hands decisively as a new king. It was the crowd who called out,

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna to the Son of David. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest! Hosanna in the highest!"

The crowd wanted Jesus to rule the land and its people, yet history teaches us that Rome directed the lives of those who lined the parade route this morning. And the Roman soldier who dispensed the law of the land were not loving and gentle taskmasters. They often forced Jews to carry loads for them; they controlled the economy, exacting taxes and arresting those who refused to pay; and they ran the legal system, which often placed the Jews at a substantial disadvantage. The Roman oppressors were feared, not loved, and they were everywhere and into every aspect of one's life. The crowd that lined the parade route hoped for a coup, an overthrow of the oppressive Roman government. It was the crowd that hoped that Jesus would seize this moment the way they had envisioned it!

As post Easter people, we know that the gathered crowd missed some of the clues along the way for Jesus did not seize the moment, as they had hoped. The crowd wanted a political Messiah, but Jesus was to be another type of Messiah. Jesus came not to bring their envisioned political peace by overthrowing their Roman oppressors, but to bring peace that begins within each believer's heart and then moves outward as a force to change the systems and structures which oppress. Jesus came to bring a transformative peace that reaps justice for all people, not just some people.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." The gathered crowd on this day in Jerusalem would have resonated with this title, "Children of God." Jews viewed this label as their title, both their destiny and a promise that God would surely fulfill. Through this Beatitude Jesus is saying to the Jews, to the crowd, to you and me that we can live into this identity as children of God, by demonstrating the character of God which bends towards peace for humanity and all of creation.

Now the peace that Christ came to bring is more than just an absence of an argument or conflict, more than an absence of an unjust government or even war. In the Hebrew scripture that Jesus knew and quoted, the word usually translated "peace" is shalom. This word can also be translated as "salvation" or "wholeness." The kind of peace Jesus is speaking about therefore brings salvation - it mends, reconciles and makes whole... it makes whole you and me and the entire created order. This peace brings - healing and wholeness - from all that limits us. We are called to be peacemakers who work towards ending conditions that constrict us and others, such as fear and apathy, hate and indifference, violence and conflict, war and so much more. What constricts and shrinks our lives and our world, making our

lives small and fear filled? Peacemakers work to end all these things, which in turn will enlarge and make whole our lives and our world.

The prophet Isaiah gives us a couple of visions of God's peace. We heard of God's reign on earth when justice dwells and righteousness abides bringing peace, quietness and trust. Isaiah says, "The people of God will abide peacefully, securely, and quietly." What a wonderful image of what it means to be blessed, to live peacefully, securely, and quietly, to live into the wholeness God desires for us and all of humanity. Isaiah gives us another picture of peace, as well, "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid... the cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together... the nursing child shall play over the hole of an asp... they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain" (Isaiah 11:6-9). These visions of peace provide the sense of wholeness encapsulated in shalom where shalom is the work of a God who changes the usual order of things, who rocks the boat, who deposes those in power over others to bring wholeness to humanity and all creation.

And this is exactly what Jesus Christ did as he entered Jerusalem some 2000 years ago. Jesus rocked the boat by not being the political Messiah the Jews hoped for. Jesus changed the usual order of things, making his meekness his strength. Jesus deposes those in power by conquering more than political power. Jesus conquers death once and for all. As I reflected on the meaning of Palm Sunday in our faith tradition, I realized that Jesus was willing to do the difficult work of peace, the difficult work of seeking the way of shalom for humanity and all of creation.

This Palm Sunday this Beatitude challenges us to the core for Jesus gave his all to give us the gift of shalom, to give us the gift of another way forward rather than returning violence for violence. This wasn't any easy decision, for we know that Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to ask if there was another way forward that required less of him, but there wasn't. And so, Jesus committed himself to the very courageous working towards shalom for all.

I wonder how willingly we are to commit to the arduous and dangerous work of shalom? Are we willing to take up a cross of responsibility to remove what constricts and makes small the lives of others? Are we willing to do the difficult work of shalom, nurturing wholeness for others and ourselves in our homes, our communities, our church, and our world? [Pause]

These beatitudes just don't seem to get any easier, do they? From my reflections as I have preached through them each subsequent beatitude seems to add another layer of difficulty, another layer of "I can't possibly live these out in my life." It's possible that we might even succumb to the attitude, 'Why bother;

they are just too hard." The problems of this world are just too big for me or even us to make a difference. [Pause]

The awarding of the Nobel peace prize in 1979 elicited a hefty outcry among those accustomed to seeing it go to notable political leaders or religious leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. Does anyone know who it was given, too? It was given to Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The critics of this decision demanded to know what Mother Teresa was doing that was deserving of the world's most coveted award for peacemaking? They cried out, "How was she really affecting world peace?"

A professor of spiritual formation, E. Glenn Hinson, gives his perspective saying, "Against Mother Teresa's critics, I would like to suggest that she was putting her finger on the very issue that most prevents us from doing the things that make for peace - focusing on an issue in macrocosm and throwing up our hands in despair."

Who among has not said at one time or another, "The problem is just too big?" Which allows us to give up, because the problem is just too big and too hard!

Hinson continues saying, "Mother Teresa threw herself into the task in microcosm, where she was in touch with the problem, and trusted God to use her small efforts."

Like these beatitudes, including ours today, Mother Teresa focused on the small things. Mother Teresa once said, "Do not underestimate our practical means - the work for the poor, no matter how small or humble - that make our life something beautiful for God."

You see being a child of God means we must practice shalom in the everyday places of our lives. Shalom is not something we can leave to Jesus or the likes of Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr.

God doesn't want us to be overwhelmed with the lack of peace in our lives, in our communities, in our country and in our world, so that we just throw our hands up and quit in despair. No, like Mother Teresa we must begin with the small and humble things. We must begin by teaching our children to begin with the small and humble things. All the while, trusting that God will make something beautiful of all of our lives.

Practice the way of shalom every chance you get. Teach the way of shalom every chance you get. Mend, heal and make whole at every opportunity. Pray for those who cut you off in traffic. To the rude and impatient person, seek to understand rather than judge, as you have no idea what might be going on in his life. To your enemy pray for her. To the one nobody likes seek to connect and say something kind.

Therese of Lisieux, from whom Mother Theresa took her name, once did something like this for a sister none of the nuns in her order could stand. It was hard for Theresa, for this sister was "very disagreeable" to everyone, including Therese. Therese had to summon up a lot of extra energy to do it, but every day she stopped the old ornery sister to say something nice to her, brought her flowers, gave her, her best smile, and in general did for her what she "would do for the person she loved the most." Little by little, the formerly unhappy and unpleasant sister's personality began to change. One day she hailed Therese and asked, "Would you tell me, Sister Therese, what attracts you so much towards me; every time you look at me, I see you smile?"

What attracted her? Therese looked beyond the nun's "disagreeableness," envisioning the beloved child of God the nun actually was. Therese saw the Christ in her sister, which gave her the strength and fortitude to practice the way of God's shalom. God's shalom can work through frail and fragile human instruments like Therese of Lisieux and Theresa of Calcutta, like you and me, as we mend, heal, and make whole one life at a time by the Spirit at work within us.

Shalom is not easy. It is not the way most people travel through life. Yet, we are called to be agents of shalom. The challenge posed to us this Palm Sunday by this Beatitude is this: "Will we do the hard and difficult work of practicing the way of shalom in small ways and even large ways with our very lives?"

I pray, we will! Amen.