

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
10 April 2022

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Palm Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“The Way of Sacrifice & Suffering”

Final Sermon in the Lenten Series: *Turning the Tables*

John 12:12-27

New Revised Standard Version

Just as we’ve experienced today that the Way of Christ of is celebration and joy, the Way of Christ is also sacrifice and suffering. But you don’t need me to tell you that. Your lived experience testifies to that truth.

The chasm between our dreams and desires and the actual reality of our lives is often quite vast, isn’t it?

Where we thought we’d be at this point in our career – is not where we are. What we thought our retirement years would look like – is not panning out as planned. Who we married and built a life with – is not the same person beside us today. The path we imagined our child taking is not the path they are on. The years we thought we’d have with our loved one are shorter than we knew. The field of study we chose which pays the bills is not the passionate purpose that fulfills our hearts.

The body we took for granted as healthy has suddenly (or gradually) betrayed us with illness or injury. And maybe some of the people we poured our energy and love into, choose no longer to be in our lives.

Like someone standing on the edge of a shore watching the tide pull our dreams and expectations out to sea, as we watch them drift further and further away out of sight, we know what it is to have to *let go* of What We Hoped Would Be in order to find a way to live with What Is.

But when we do find a way to live with What Is (rather than what we wish were so) – we form new dreams, new desires – that cast our vision across horizons that we didn’t even know existed. Those horizons wait patiently for us to find them. The sun rises and the sun sets; the cycles of life do not wait for us notice them; they are just faithfully present, and

persistent. And one day we do turn and look and see – and the chasm of our life and our longings closes just a bit, and then closes just a bit more – until the distance is such that we can make a leap...from one shore to the next. That leap hold hope. That leap takes faith. And that leap is rarely without suffering or sacrifice.

When Jesus stands on the metaphorical shoreline of Palm Sunday – I wonder what he sees? I wonder What He is Letting Go Of in order To Face What Is, in order to embrace What Will Be?

These past few weeks the Narrative Lectionary has taken us through John's Gospel in such a way that we know what's coming for Jesus, but today, today we hit rewind and go back to Chapter 12, to this pivotal moment in Jesus' life. The Moment when Jesus could have Turned Away instead of Turning Toward. You know this kind of a moment...the moment right before you said that one thing, or took that turn, or made that decision – the moment that you replay again and again – wondering if something had happened slightly differently or if you had made a different

choice...if you would be dealing with what you're dealing with today. This was one of THOSE moments for Jesus. Everything hinged on whether he entered Jerusalem or fled for his life.

After a few weeks of looking at how Jesus has been Turning the Tables in his raising of Lazarus from the dead, washing the feet of his disciples during a meal, dealing with Peter's denial in the midst of his trial, standing before Pilate as the accused, being flogged and condemned and handed over for crucifixion – today we turn back time a bit to see how the Table was already Turned in Jesus long before the last week of his life.

If a perfectly set table represents the ways of the world and how we think our lives will go, how we plan them to be (centerpiece and all) – then Jesus was born as a Topsy Turvy Turned Over Table from the beginning. The son of an unwed teenage mom and working-class carpenter from Nazareth, born in a feeding trough in Bethlehem, forced to flee as a refugee when Herod wanted all little boys executed because of their “potential threat” to his power.

Nothing about Jesus' life has been conventional...and that's just the first two years of his life.

You see, Jesus doesn't just Turn the Tables of *our* lives, he lives and moves and has his being in the world as a Turned Over Table himself. He's a man who doesn't let social convention or correct manners persuade his actions or fear of pain keep him from diving in! He lives his life as one who doesn't have to turn over what might be good or nice or convenient for him, for he sees what is good for him as inherently connected to what is good for others. There is no differentiation. The self-giving love of God is the very nature of Jesus...and anytime someone is self-giving it's gonna create some chaos in a world where self-preservation rules the day.

Jesus challenges our conceptions of what makes for Good Life. We tend to think of th Good Life in terms of material wealth or power or success or achievement in our careers or good health or a long retirement or a multi-generational family. And certainly those things are good. But if we look at Jesus' life –

he has none of those things. According to Jesus, and this passage, what makes a Good Life is servanthood (washing feet), sacrifice (letting go of some comfort for the cause of the gospel), and yes – suffering (not resisting pain, but walking straight into it as an act of faith and solidarity with ALL who suffer). We don't tend to think of servanthood, sacrifice, and suffering as Good, but they do bring about good in our lives and in the world if let them transform us.

Perhaps this understanding is what allows Jesus to continue teaching his message of Life and Love even as he is facing his own torture and death. Unlike other gospel accounts that have Jesus asking for God the Father to take “this cup of suffering and death” from him, praying that there be any other way – in John's gospel, Jesus is unwavering. *“Now my soul is troubled, [yes, but] what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”* (John 12:27)

What if Jesus had run away from Jerusalem to preserve himself in the face of danger? Would if he had run from death rather than running toward it,

ultimately giving us all life?
 None of us would have faulted
 him. And he might have lived
 to be 70 or 80 years old, sure.
 But would we have known who
 he was? Would we have
 understood God's love for us
 in the same way?

On Palm Sunday we remember
 and re-enact a great
 juxtaposition of our faith:

How *We Want* to Experience
 Jesus' Journey

versus

How Jesus' Journey *Actually*
 Unfolds.

Which, of course, reflects our
 own lives. We tend to prefer
 the celebratory parts of our life
 and faith – hence the waving
 palms and singing songs of
 praise. Yet we often avoid or
 ignore or shove down the
 suffering, sacrificial parts – we
 know they happen, but we
 don't want to dwell on them,
 we just want God to make
 them go away.

But what if it's not in God's
 nature to "make them go
 away?" But rather "to find a
 way" to be WITH us as we
 seek to find *our way* – even
 when there seems to be no
 way?

As Jesus acknowledges his
 suffering, he invites us to join
 him in suffering – not because
 he wants us to experience pain,
 but simply because to be
 human is to suffer and if we're
 going to suffer anyway, we
 might as well not suffer alone.

It's worth repeating: it is
 human to suffer. Pain and
 suffering are not doled out in
 accordance with how faithful
 or unfaithful one is. Pain and
 suffering just are.

But perhaps you have noticed
 that when you stop resisting,
 and when you let go a little bit
 into the experience, there is
 often a deepening of empathy
 that happens within you. An
 ability to relate to more people,
 to forgive more easily, to listen
 more readily, to rush to
 judgment less frequently, to
 give thanks for blessings more
 easily. It would be great if we
 could discover this or tap into
 it without our own physical,
 mental, or emotional suffering.
 But so often, we cannot.

Perhaps because it is in
 realizing our human fragility,
 that we come to truly know our
 dependence on God and our
 interdependence with others –
 which is our created nature.

We're not meant to survive on our own, or suffer on our own!

“A most important discovery has been made about trees. According to Derl Keefer, “Scientists have found that when the roots of two trees touch, there is a substance present that reduces competition. An unknown fungus helps link the roots of various trees, including different species. In this way, a whole forest can be incorporated together. With certain trees having access to nutrients, other trees access to water, and still other trees access to sunlight, possessing the means to cooperate is essential to [their] surviv[al] and grow[th].”¹

When one tree suffers or lacks, another provides for that tree, often releasing some of the nutrients or water it has for itself to give to the tree in need. Trees are continually sacrificing like this for the sake of the forest.

It is a model in nature that we see emulated in Jesus, and that we too, are to emulate as ones who follow in the Way of Jesus...a Way that, yes, will

involve some sacrifice and suffering on our part.

In the end, perhaps the biggest table that Jesus turns over in our lives, is the Table of Our Expectations of how our lives “should go” if we are “Good People of Faith.” The fact is, at Creation, God calls all people Good. And it’s those of us who claim to be People of Faith that must claim that Goodness as Fact, for ourselves and for others, and not tie that Goodness to External Circumstances or Situations.

I think we’d all say Jesus was a “good person of faith” – and look what happened to him! ALL people suffer, some more than others, but it is not related to our faith or belief (or lack thereof) in God. At least, in my lived experience, I see no evidence of that. Some of the most faithful people I know suffer with pains and griefs that feel unfair and unjustified if one were to equate suffering with faith or generosity or “being a good, moral person.”

And likewise, in my reading of Scripture, the characters and people we love the most – are often the ones who suffer

¹ Harold C. Warlick Jr., *You Have Mail from God! Second Lessons Sermons for*

Advent/Christmas/Epiphany, Cycle C (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing, 2000), 56.

deeply (and maybe that's why we love them...because we can relate to them!) I challenge you to find one "hero" or "she-ro" of your faith in Scripture (or in your life) that has not experienced great suffering or who has been immune from deep loss or challenging circumstances.

Acknowledging this can help us all accept that our suffering is not personal. And that God is not punishing us. But rather God is with us in our journey, and inviting us to see how our journey is not one of isolation, but solidarity with all of humanity.

Resilience researcher Lucy Hone, who lost her 12 year old daughter in a tragic car accident, has written a book called *Resilient Grieving*.

One of the ideas she explores in the book has to do with how many people deal with grief by asking, 'Why me?' Lucy came to see that this was counter-productive in her own life. In one of her TedTalks she asks people in the audience to stand up if any of the following have happened to you – then she

lists a bunch of things like dementia, a physical impairment, cancer, divorce, death of a child, etc. – and within 30 seconds the whole room was standing – and the point of this whole illustration was to help people realize that adversity does not discriminate.²

"As much as we don't want this to be true, terrible things happen to us all. And knowing that makes it so important to understand how you react in tough times and to understand the ways of thinking and acting that can help you navigate your [most difficult] days."³

Resilient people understand that bad things happen and that suffering is a part of life and that knowing this keeps them from feeling like victims. "Understanding that everybody suffers in parts of life, that actually very often daily we all struggle and suffer, and that is absolutely part of the universal existence...well, it stops you from feeling singled out and discriminated against when something goes wrong. But critically, it also stops you from beating yourself up when

² Shankar Vedantam & Lucy Hone, "Healing Your Heart" *Hidden Brain Podcast* (April 4, 2022), accessed

on April 10, 2022 at <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/healing-your-heart/>.

³ Vedantam & Hone, *ibid*.

things go wrong. We live in an era of perfectionism, and it's so important for people to understand that yeah, we all do things wrong all day long, and that doesn't mean we need to be punished, that doesn't mean we're bad or useless, it just means we're human."⁴

Palm Sunday and Holy Week remind us that as humans we are not saved from sacrifice or suffering, rather we might just be sent straight into it (as Jesus was). But we are not sent alone.

We are sent with Christ, who is king, but not king in the ways we think. Interestingly, John's gospel is the only gospel that mentions palms on Palm Sunday; the other gospels mention leafy branches but not palms. And in John, you don't get any mention of Jesus sending his disciples off to find a donkey like you find in the other gospels. Really, everything in John's gospel centers on the proclamation of his kingship.⁵ And of course, just the fact that Jesus rides in on a donkey is a reference to the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9:

warlike kings rode on horses
and in chariots; the king of
peace rides on a donkey's colt.

In the ancient world, the palm in the ancient world was a symbol used to celebrate the victory of a battle or the arrival of a dignitary when the Emperor would show up. It would be akin to the patriotic display of waving a flag on the Fourth of July in the United States. So the waving of palms (specifically palms) is John's way of saying to us without question that Jesus is being given a welcome which is suitable for a king.⁶

Additionally, the crowds go go out of the city to meet Jesus, they do not wait for him to arrive in Jerusalem, they meet him outside of the city walls, which is akin to rolling out the red carpet. This is the way you would greet a visiting dignitary; you'd go out of the city to welcome the visitor to your town; this too was a sign of something you would do for a visiting king.⁷

And we find in the middle of all of this "kingly welcome"; a

⁴ Vedantam & Hone, *ibid*.

⁵ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, "NL Podcast 490: The Crucified Messiah - Apr. 10, 2022," *Working Preacher* (April 3, 2022), accessed on April 10, 2022 at

[workingpreacher.org/podcasts/490-the-crucified-messiah-apr-10-2022](https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/490-the-crucified-messiah-apr-10-2022).

⁶ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

⁷ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

surprising testimony which really gets across the point John is trying to make in his gospel: Jesus is about Life. In verses 17-18 we read that, *“the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. And it was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him.”*

You see, “the hallmark of Jesus’ kingship – for these people and for us today – is his power to give Life.”⁸ Even though the crowd doesn’t fully understand what that means, they have an inkling for they are correct in what they say. *“At the heart of Jesus’ kingship is not his ability to dominate, but his ability to give – and to give Life. Lazarus being called out of the tomb becomes emblematic [in John’s gospel] of Jesus giving new life in all of its forms.”*⁹ That kind of Life-Giving is at the center of Jesus’ passion – and this is the main point John continues to show us throughout his gospel. (Think all the way back to when Jesus turned water into wine to bring life to a party!)

⁸ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

⁹ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

It’s also what makes it appropriate that we celebrate baptism on Palm Sunday. To enter the waters of baptism is to remember one of the most important symbols of Life that we have, and one of the most humbling acts that Jesus took part in – dying to the sole focus of one’s own desires in life and rising to walk in a newness of life that celebrates Life as Good.

The other key thing that differentiates John’s gospel story of Palm Sunday from the other gospels is that the Greeks show up!¹⁰ It’s just one more way that John emphasizes that Jesus’ kingship is for the Jewish people AND ALSO for the wider world.

This same emphasis on *all people* is seen in John 1 when John places Jesus as the Christ of All Creation, existing from the beginning with God before coming to dwell as flesh among us, full of glory and truth: *“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people,”* (John 1:3-4). And we

¹⁰ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

see this theme again at the end of Jesus' life in John 19:19, as the sign that hangs over his crucified body on the cross says, "*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*" – and John states that this sign was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. John's gospel is the only one that mentions this detail,¹¹ but it is key to his theology and Christology – Jesus is for the world just as God's love is for the WORLD!

In sum, the whole entry of Jesus into Jerusalem in John's gospel is about celebrating "*a king who brings life out of death, and a king who goes to death for others rather than putting others to death.*"¹² This is Jesus' claim to kingship; a very different kind of reign than we see and experience from others.

So in John, what does royal power look like? As one scholar says, "*Well, it's measured both by the magnitude of what Jesus is willing to give – namely his whole self, his whole being, his whole life – and by what that gift leads to for others. Which is that it ultimately leads to Life for others.*"¹³ This is what

power looks like. Using the power God gives us, to bring Life to others.

When we take stock of our days - what has caused us pain or suffering or where we have been asked to sacrifice for another or where another has sacrificed for us...may we ask ourselves where in those crevices and chasms has love reigned. Because, "Where love reigns, life reigns."¹⁴ Where love resides, life thrives.

This Psalm Sunday, may our waving palms be more than songs of praise...may our waving palm be a living balm – a sign for a worry and wearied world that needs to good news still today.

This Holy Week, stand on the shoreline with Jesus. Take a leap this Holy Week and see where you land. What do you need to Let Go Of in order to step more fully into What Is and What Will Be?

Amen.

¹¹ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

¹² Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

¹³ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*