

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
April 2, 2023  
John 12: 9-26

During Lent, we have been following some of the stories in the gospel of John, long stories full of interesting details. A taxing time to be the liturgist, when the reading is almost as long as the sermon. We began with the first miracle recorded; the story of Jesus turning water to wine at the wedding of Cana. One of the themes identified in that story is that Jesus, contrary to the tradition, to the laws, to the customs, did not discard unclean things, but transform them into clean things. Jesus changed the unclean water jugs into wine that rescued a wedding about to end in shambles. He not only cared about people trapped in limited resources and a proclivity to end up unclean and embarrassed, but he had the power to change the categories, to redeem rather than discard. To transform rather than exclude.

That has a been a theme through each of the subsequent stories that we have looked at. That Jesus responds with compassion and he responds in love, and he is able to expand or alter the categories so that those deemed or destined to be unclean and on the outside facing condemnation or abandonment, are redeemed, included, raised to new status. This includes the woman at the well who Jesus shows compassion towards but also views her as a person of the covenant, extending love and kindness to her, to the point that a village of Samaritans, unclean outsiders, start to turn to Christ.

This is true of the man born blind who Jesus heals, and in doing so breaks sabbath laws. One with a physical deformity was considered sinful, outside of the norm. And so, Jesus dignifies a man continually accused of being a cursed sinner. In the story of Lazarus, Jesus makes alive and whole and clean one who was relegated to the grave.

Jesus holds out the hope of grace, of new life, of the possibility of being born again even when old and stuck in one's ways and prone to lecture the younger generations, and prone to hold onto to old truisms, like Nicodemus. But Nicodemus, also among our stories during lent, showed himself capable of redemption. Not only do those on the outside get included, but the stuck-in-their-ways insiders are also capable of changing and of following Christ path of grace.

Jesus is reinterpreting the law, expanding the boundaries of God's grace, making room for people, making possible personal change and redemption. Jesus is reinterpreting the law and how we live in relationship with God, how we love the

lord with our whole heart and our neighbors as ourselves. He is practicing what Paul will coin later in his letter to the Galatians, that in Christ there is no longer a delineation between Jew and Greek, all get to come into the temple, no longer a distinction between male and female, no longer a separate court on the outskirts of the temple for woman, no longer slave or free.

So, Jesus has something to say all of us who think we know God, know what God wants, know how to fulfill the great commandments, who is in and who is out. He calls for a fresh openness, a willingness to be changed and redeemed and to realize we are part of God's kingdom and thus responsible to carry it out.

But at the same time, one of the themes running through John's gospel is that the religious leaders are getting uncomfortable with Jesus, and even adversarial at many points. Jesus is reinterpreting the tradition and he is leading people away from a more traditional and wooden Judaism, to follow his teaching. They are concerned that Jesus is undoing everything they have known and have taught. And so, they are trying to undermine Jesus, trying to sabotage or do away with him. So, in that way, Jerusalem and the region around it starts to spell trouble to the disciples, that things are going to go badly if they go back to Jerusalem. In last week's story about the raising of Lazarus, we heard the disciples get concerned about going to Judea to help Lazarus who was sick and dying. And Thomas pipes up, let us go die with him—that sense that the opposition is going to ramp up if he goes near Jerusalem.

At the same time, when Jesus enters Jerusalem, all these old expectations of a messianic and political leader are triggered. John, as well as the other gospel writers, recount the events with the advantage of hindsight. They view the palms and hosannas in light of the prophecy of Zechariah, confirming that Jesus was the messiah, the donkey and the palms all signs of God's plan playing out. Hosanna, they shout, "save us!" But, they mean political salvation, national independence, control over their own temple, own capital.

And so, as Jesus comes into Jerusalem on what we celebrate as Palm Sunday, all these elements are coming together. The disciples and those who have followed and heard of Jesus press in faithfully, eager to be with him and to learn from him. The crowds hear of his miracles and his provocative teachings and think he is the messiah who will liberate them from Rome, and start waving palms and shouting "save us," and the Jewish leadership get more and more threatened and poised to respond to this growing threat.

All this energy and tension is coming to a head. And while the disciples are rightly concerned about going back to Jerusalem, and making this triumphal display under the noses of their opposition, John states, as he will periodically in the passion account, that “His disciples did not understand these things at first.”

What all of them miss is that Jesus isn't just reinterpreting the law in fresh ways, meaning reinterpreting how we love the Lord and how we love our neighbors and who is a part of God's people. There is something else going on as well. Jesus is not only reinterpreting the law as to how we live out our place in God's family, but he is also fulfilling the law in matters of sin and uncleanness, in matters of forgiveness and how that is achieved, in matters of atonement and what is possible, in matters of reconciliation with our God. Jesus himself will be the fulfillment.

And so, John records an interesting interchange after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He tells us that some Greeks, meaning unclean non-Jewish Hellenistic thinking types of folk, had heard about him and were looking for him and wanted to speak with him. They probably heard that he has room for unclean non-Jewish folks, like the Samaritan woman. They too wanted to be included in the faith and in relationship to God, and in worship at the temple or the synagogue. And Jesus' pattern has been to make time and room for such people. But this time, Jesus has other matters to attend to. He responds: no room in the calendar, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

You see, the culmination of Jesus' ministry was not just teaching, not just reinterpreting, not just making room for the previously excluded. It was to become the Passover lamb, to transform the relationship between God and God's people, and who might be considered God's people. There is something that we cannot learn or glean through Jesus' teaching. It is something Jesus must do for us. And that hour had come.

And so, Jesus will not oblige the Greeks this time. Events had been set into motion. He would be the Passover lamb that would cover all, Jews and Greeks. He would become the scapegoat so that all might be forgiven and free. He would offer atonement to all, a place in the inner courts for all that desire it.

The time had come to go beyond teaching and modeling. He must do what we could not do, the things that we could not rectify through good behavior or by following the law and all the sacrifices and festivals, or that we could not achieve through a well-meaning heart or through hard work. There was something that Jesus alone must do for us, that we cannot earn, only receive/accept. To fulfill the law once for all, to put an end to the need to constantly maintain or earn one's

salvation or forgiveness, to bring change not to political systems or nationalities but to the fabric of one's heart, to the fabric of our personhood and our ability to be in community.

Yes, we enter this holy week, when Jesus went beyond teaching and reinterpreting and touching the unclean and being with the inquisitive, though these were all still valid and relevant. But he was about achieving something else. The fulfillment of all sacrifices, the fulfillment of Jeremiah's vision of the law being written on hearts, the fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones growing flesh.

And so, we join the crowds today, as all this energy and tension comes to a head, to sing Hosanna, save us, from the things we cannot save ourselves from. We sing Hosanna, but with some hindsight, knowing it is no longer about politics and nations, but about hearts, and redeeming our humanity, and the possibilities of a community of God's people that has no boundaries for keeping people out.

"Hosanna!" And "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!" Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna.

And all God's people said...

**Psalm 118** *A Song of Victory*

- <sup>1</sup> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever!
- <sup>2</sup> Let Israel say,  
“His steadfast love endures forever.”
- <sup>19</sup> Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the LORD.
- <sup>20</sup> This is the gate of the LORD;  
the righteous shall enter through it.
- <sup>21</sup> I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.
- <sup>22</sup> The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.
- <sup>23</sup> This is the LORD’s doing;  
it is marvelous in our eyes.
- <sup>24</sup> This is the day that the LORD has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
- <sup>25</sup> Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!  
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!
- <sup>26</sup> Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.  
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
- <sup>27</sup> The LORD is God,  
and he has given us light.  
Bind the festal procession with branches,  
up to the horns of the altar.
- <sup>28</sup> You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;  
you are my God, I will extol you.
- <sup>29</sup> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.

### *The Plot to Kill Lazarus*

<sup>9</sup> When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, <sup>11</sup> since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

### *Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem*

*(Mt 21:1–11; Mk 11:1–11; Lk 19:28–40)*

<sup>12</sup> The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—  
the King of Israel!”

<sup>14</sup> Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

<sup>15</sup> “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,  
sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

<sup>16</sup> His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. <sup>17</sup> So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. <sup>18</sup> It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. <sup>19</sup> The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”

### *Some Greeks Wish to See Jesus*

<sup>20</sup> Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. <sup>21</sup> They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” <sup>22</sup> Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup> Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup> Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. <sup>25</sup> Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup> Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.