



CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

PARADE OR PROTEST?

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Text: Mark 11:1–11

As they approached Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent off two of his disciples with this instruction, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Rabbi needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them what Jesus had said; and the people allowed the disciples to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. And everyone around Jesus, in front or in back of him, cried out:

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God!

Blessed is the coming reign of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

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In January, on his first Sunday as Lead Minister of Plymouth Church, DeWayne attended the virtual coffee hour held in his honor. 150 or so tiny Zoom squares filled multiple screens on one’s computer, people eager to get another glimpse of our long awaited and already treasured Lead Minister. Everyone on that call would have much rather been in Guild Hall, lining up to shake DeWayne’s hand and say *Hello! Welcome! We are so glad you are here!* But in this now familiar yet still awkward time of pandemic, a Zoom celebration was the best we could do. There was joy and enthusiasm as people commended DeWayne on a fine first sermon and extended words of greeting and hope and promise in short sound bites, often being reminded “You need to unmute yourself”—a phrase some of us now experience saying multiple times a day. But it was the end of our time together that morning that was most memorable. As DeWayne answered the typical getting-to-know-each-other questions, he was then given an opportunity to ask questions of those gathered.

“What are you carrying?” he asked. It was a question that laid bare this pastor’s heart, a question offered in tenderness into the fierce complexities of a time so filled with grief, despair, worry, isolation. “What are you carrying?” DeWayne asked, and, after a pause in which wheels were turning inside of heads and hearts, the realization settled that here is our new minister ready to care deeply about who we are and interested in the varied layers of our lives. I am sure, also, it was a wake up to the fact that we had now moved past the perfunctory get-to-know-you stuff of favorite foods and music and books to read. We were going deep now.

“What are you carrying?”: the health concerns of parents, the grief over a recent loss, the uncertainty of a job, the despair over a vitriolic political season, the momentous quest for justice, the hard work of racial equity, the sadness over isolation, the absence of hugs, the trauma of gun violence, the dissension in families, the wrestling with a health condition, the inability to share even a cup of coffee with our new minister in hallowed Guild Hall. What we realized in those shared moments was that the weight of what we are carrying—collectively and alone—was crushing. And to be able to put words to the weight, to speak petitions as prayers we trusted others would hear and acknowledge: that was the gift of the question that could even lead to some release.

Almost three months later I am still ruminating on that question for three reasons: First, with every day I become more aware of what some of you are carrying, because I am blessed to have meaningful conversations with you during which you trust me with the heaviness of your load. Second, I know that the things we carry as a community—racial reckoning, gun violence, the Chauvin trial, the hate crimes against Asian Americans, the increased crime in our neighborhoods, the exhaustion of this pandemic—all have taken a devastating toll on our spirits. And third, I believe in the collective companionship of this faith community to be present to one another so as to offer the love and support necessary to encourage the possibility of laying down what we carry. This capacity to care for one another flows from our covenant but is made manifest in acts of empathy, reaching out, listening deeply and standing with. This is what it means to be church: to be the reason we can lay down what we carry and move forward freer and lighter in spirit, ready to pursue gospel work together.

And so I am thinking on this Palm Sunday about the people who gathered on the road that led into Jerusalem and laid down that which they carried—their own cloaks and leafy branches to pave the way for Jesus’ triumphal entry. And I believe that they were not just laying down material items, creating a more hospitable entry for this mysterious stranger, this embodiment of an unrecognizable God. Embedded in those cloaks and branches was the pain of life, the fear of the empire, the burden of not knowing who to trust, the concern for the future, the desperation for basic need. Here was a people not unlike us, showing up with hearts filled with both hope and helplessness—longing for things to be different, life to feel more secure, love to be incarnate.

And what did they shout to the One who strode in on the back of a colt? “Hosanna!” which means, “Save us!” Save us, we pray, from all that we carry: the burdens of grief, of despair, of oppression. Save us, Jesus, so we can release what we carry like the cloaks and the palms and experience the kind of love you promise, a love that comes only from the Divine, a love that restores and renews, a love that creates purpose and meaning. A love that will give us the strength to take the next step, fight the next fight, a love that encourages us to keep showing up. We have always referred to this scene as a parade, but I think it was a protest, an uprising against the status quo, a laying free of the burdens of empire and a welcoming of something new, a tangible possibility of new life.

And we are a people who know something now about protest and the power in that communal response. Three years ago I stood in this pulpit and preached a Palm Sunday sermon the day after I joined many of you and hundreds of thousands of others in a “March for Our Lives”—youth-led demonstrations all over the world orchestrated by the courageous survivors of the horrific Valentine’s Day school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018. We cried for change in the system—to ban assault weapons, to create and pass common-sense gun laws. That Palm Sunday weekend we showed up carrying our pain, and we cried out with anger, with insistence, pleading for change, demanding to be saved. We paraded through the streets, but it was absolutely a protest—a beseeching that status quo is unacceptable and the powers that be must do better.

Palm Sunday is redeemed from any triviality when we enter fully into the story, beyond the parade, when instead the protest becomes ours, and when we acknowledge our dire need. And yes, we know something about protest now. People showing up in community squares and government spaces, in streets and

parking lots to say no to the empire, to shout in solidarity a collective *Hosanna!* because change is imperative for survival, to articulate through chant and song and despair and anger that what too many of our siblings have been given to carry is not fair, has never been fair, and we are long overdue for justice. In the last week we carry the pain of ten murdered in Boulder and eight gunned down in Georgia, and numerous others who do not get media attention have died as well because of gun violence. It pains me to think that nothing has changed in three years, and that we are accepting these horrific crimes as part of the fabric of the American way. And so just as we tell the Palm Sunday story and place ourselves in the path of Jesus, letting go of our cloaks and laying down branches upon which he might step, we must also find the strength to lay down what we carry so as to continue the relentless work of mending what is broken, dismantling white supremacy and building systems in which access to guns becomes much harder to achieve and assault weapons are banned. The protest parade must continue. The Palm Sunday scene can give us courage when we remember that the people who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with shouts of “Hosanna!” were also pleading for change. We do not cry out to be saved if we want things to remain the same.

A parade or a protest—they involve community. In every protest I have been a part of there is intent, and it can be intense, but there is also joy in the gathering, joy in the solidarity, joy in the possibility that people are united in making something different and that oppressed voices are finally invited to sing. There was joy in the palm protest parade the day that Jesus appeared in Jerusalem, his humility astride a colt, because he embodied a promise of something far greater than human understanding. And so, my friends, even under all that weighs you down, let us not forget our capacity for joy, let us not lose our capacity for hope, let us not abandon our capacity for love. Because love—known, realized, shared, and understood—is what will save us.

“What are you carrying?” DeWayne asks us. I know the answer changes daily. Can you name it? In speaking it, does it lessen its grip upon you or perhaps in the naming you loosen your grip upon it? Let us tend to one another with this question, and also let us offer to the other a gentle commitment to assist in the laying down of burdens, so we can all look up and see approaching in the most unexpected of ways the possibility of something transforming and new.

Amen.