

16 March, 2008
Palm Sunday
Mo. Kathleen Patton

The bolded parts of this story tell about the disciples. Tell about the people who followed Jesus, in one measure or another. Starting with the crowds. So we get to participate, in a sense, as Jesus' modern-day disciples in this story.

The crowds welcome Jesus in that part we hear outside, don't they? They're singing Hosanna, they're laying down their coats and their palm branches in the road, which was a sign of reverence for royalty. It's the kind of thing one would do before Caesar, to make sure there was no dust to disturb the dignitary passing by.

So you can see how this might have been disturbing to the Jewish authorities, who could see that already we had trouble coming from Rome.

But the crowd is enthusiastic. Perhaps because of what they have heard of him from others. He's fed people, he's healed people, he's reached out and taught the people in a very direct and caring way – different from the way that people are used to being spoken to by people in authority. So Jesus is tremendously popular and he's welcomed, when he rides into the city, by throngs.

And yet later in the story, these same throngs who have welcomed him seem very easily manipulated by the powers-that-be to condemn him. For their relationship with Jesus is very superficial. It's all based on What Works For Me Right Now. And What Is Convenient For Me Right Now. And when it no longer works for me or is convenient for me or when there's some cost associated with being a follower of Jesus, they're ready to let go. Right away.

Then there are the disciples. And when Matthew uses that term, he's speaking specifically of the twelve in this case. And these are Jesus' closest allies, they are people he has particularly hand-chosen and invited to live and walk and work in proximity to himself. They're the people he delegates to help do his work in the world. They are the people he's preparing to carry on his ministry. They are the Chosen Ones.

And yet all of the gospel writers make them the continual butt of something that seems like a joke, almost. For even though they are the insiders and the ones who get the most instruction and help, they still never really seem to get it. So that when Jesus says, "You know, I'm gonna die," and you know it doesn't take a divine sense of prescience to know that.

I mean, you think about Martin Luther King [Jr.] and how clearly he understood that he was going to die because he was talking about things that White America was not ready to hear about. And he knew what happened to people who [did] that. So he prepared his followers, too.

But Jesus' followers didn't want to hear that. They wanted to believe that Jesus was the divinely chosen one who would somehow triumph over all of this. So that when Jesus tells Peter he's going to die, Peter says, "No way!" And Jesus has that famous line: "Get thee behind me, Satan." Jesus would surely have loved to have avoided the death that was coming his way, but he knew that was not to be.

But Peter and the crew never really got that. They never really bought into that, and when Jesus breaks that bread and gives them the wine and says, "This is my body, this is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me." He's clearly telling them, "I'm not going to be with you too much longer, friends." They still won't buy in – and when they go to the garden of Gethsemane, they fall asleep. They're overwhelmed. They're depressed. I mean, that's what I do when I'm overwhelmed and depressed. I go to sleep, if I can! Of course, I can't at 2 in the morning and then I'm awake but you know, whatever. That's what happens when people are overwhelmed.

And when the time comes and the arresting party arrives, Matthew's version of the story says [that] Peter not only betrays Christ, the whole band disappears. All of them.

Then there are the women. Matthew talks about Mary Magdalene, probably the most famous of his [Jesus'] followers, and then Mary the mother of some of the disciples and... You know, there's all these Marys that we kind of all slosh together in the "Women" category. And to me they seem to embody this faithful, nurturing presence.

Matthew says that they have supported Jesus and that does not just mean that they took care of his physical needs by taking care of the whole tribe of followers, but financially as well. That out of whatever resources they had they made this whole journey possible.

They have carried him in their hearts. They have connected. Where the disciples may have connected in kind of an intellectual way with Jesus' teaching, the women have connected with him in a *heart* way, I think. They've fed him. They've looked out for him.

And when push comes to shove and everything falls apart, they're still there. They're still there.

There's a beautiful Patty Griffin song called "Mary". Part of it's a little bit funny, she has Jesus saying –

Jesus says mother I couldn't stay another day longer
Flies right by me and leaves a kiss upon her face
While the angels are singin' his praises in a blaze of glory
Mary stays behind and starts cleaning up the place

And then it goes on,

You cast aside the sheet, you cast aside the shroud
Of another man, who served the world proud
You greet another son, you lose another one.

That sense of the one who always stays and who is always in that place of grieving and letting go, but caring in her heart. There they are at the cross and at the tomb.

And lastly, there is Joseph of Arimathea. And Matthew has him a wealthy man. Mark actually says he was a member of the San Hedron, of the ruling council of elders that actually condemned Jesus to death. And he's a strange one. For he comes forward at the oddest of times, when everything has gone to pieces. When Jesus not only has been condemned, but is *dead*. When it's really most dangerous.

The disciples have fled because they don't want to be associated with Jesus right now. They don't want to suffer the same fate. And perhaps the women have a little bit of cover because, after all, they're women. And no one takes them seriously.

But Joseph goes right to the source of power, right to Rome's representative, the governor Pilate, and asks for the body. At just the moment when there is absolutely nothing to gain from such a thing, but in fact great danger. And one has to ask why this man of power and wealth would do such a thing?

And it just makes me wonder if it didn't come out of some late but deep sense of integrity. That having seen the whole sham of all this go down that at some point he had to say, 'Even if it gains me nothing, even if this is a movement that has sprung up and been snuffed out like a candle, I need to align myself with this now. I need to stand here now. To be a whole person, to be able to live with myself.'

And we've got all these words in bold in this story because we, the disciples, also need to enter the story and we need to ask ourselves where we are in this story. Are we among those for whom Jesus is a convenience? For a solace that works for us now, and when it's not working for us, oh well?

Perhaps we the ordained and the vestry members and altar-guild members and the choir members and the people who have signed up to do something and, you know, be faithful to the church – maybe we're a little like the disciples who have a sense of duty and place and purpose in this institution, but perhaps our allegiance sometimes comes from a place that is not so deep. And when it doesn't work for us, when it doesn't make sense for us, it's easy to draw back and not be all the way there. Maybe even to run away.

Or maybe we're like the women who really can't help themselves. Maybe we can't help ourselves either, in some degree. We can't help believing and following and no matter

what, we're going to be there. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't seem right, but we can't walk away from that lifeless body.

Or maybe like Joseph. We have stood apart for too long, and the attraction of this person of love and integrity is compelling us to make a commitment even though there is nothing for us in it.

And maybe we're a little bit of all of those. But you know, in a way, as good as it is to think about where we are in this story (and I do encourage you to ask yourself that question) there is a way in which it doesn't matter. And that is this: That wherever you are in this story, wherever I am in this story, wherever we are in this story, Jesus is in the same exact place in relationship to us.

The collect for Friday says that 'he stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace'. Everyone. The faithful, the unfaithful, the ones who are just doing it because it works for now, and the ones who couldn't be torn away no matter what, and the ones who need him and the ones who don't know how much they need him. Everyone.

God's incredible love for us is made manifest in the servant-hood of Jesus, who poured himself out for us. [He] gave himself to us fully, and reaches out to us from that hard wood of the cross.

This Holy Week calls us from wherever we are in our journey, wherever we are in our relationship with God, to turn and face that cross and open our hearts to that presence; allow ourselves to be called forth and transformed in God's grace.

Amen.