

A meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Palm/Passion Sunday, March 28, 2010, dedicated to the memory of Bob Williams, who entered eternal life yesterday, and always to the glory of God!

“An Exciting Faith Loves Selflessly” *

Luke 22:14–23:56 or 23:1–49

(Part VII of VIII in sermon series “An Exciting Faith”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock & our salvation. Amen.
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With loud “Hosannas!” we have entered Holy Week. We are headed up to Jerusalem. Like Jesus, we are going down to our deaths. Like Jesus, we are all headed toward a cross, one way or another. But there are different paths to the cross: the way of the crowd, the way of separateness and the way of Jesus. This Palm Sunday, these paths are held up for us to survey.

An Orthodox teacher used the phrase “glittering sadness” to describe Palm Sunday. There is such unbearable beauty and such pain today. Jesus is hailed as king. He winds up a slave. He empties himself completely. He accepts torture and execution at the hands of humans. He is killed with total forgiveness as his final breath. He loves us and all humanity unconditionally to the bitter end (drawn from Sara Miles, *Sorrow and Love Flow Mingled Down*, an essay on Palm

Sunday, 2010).

From our great hymn *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, we hear, *See, from his head, his hands, his feet; sorrow and love flow mingled down.* Christ's crucifixion reveals the passion, the sorrow and the love intermingled at the heart of all our lives. His untimely and brutal death force us to choose how we will arrive at the cross. Will we bear this pain together, or use it to separate ourselves from others?

The great poet W.H. Auden was asked once why he was a Christian, instead of a Buddhist or a Confucian, since all these religions share similar ethical values. And Auden said, "Because nothing in the figure of Buddha or Confucius fills me with the overwhelming desire to scream, 'Crucify him.'"

The desire to crucify is the way of the crowd. A crowd has the power to make people feel less alone in the face of death. This is why crowd mentality is always somewhere at the heart of the violence done by religions and rulers.

We see on this Palm/Passion Sunday that the crowd is seductive. It makes and shapes our worldly identities, through hosannas on one day and violence on another, through celebrations and through separation. By the end of this week, the crowd pushes Jesus' own disciples to say: "That man? I don't know him; he's not one of us." The crowd helps frightened, isolated individuals identify with the power of Caesar, the power of the temple, the nation, the tribe. The crowd allows prideful humans even to attempt to take the place of God: deciding who to judge, who to punish, who to scapegoat, who to allow into our body. With the crowd of palm-bearers, we cling to the Messianic power. With the crowd on the way of the cross, we go to our inevitable deaths – and the inevitability of our pain (drawn from Miles' essay). But we do not have to walk to the cross alone.

Three days ago, I stood by the bedside of Bob Williams, alongside his wife, Nancy. Bob had just received word that

what doctors thought was pneumonia was in fact the late stages of lung cancer. In the face of inevitable death, Bob was conversant and coherent, relational and even hopeful. He knew he was on his final journey. But he also knew he was not alone. The moment was both sad and beautiful at the same time. I wondered, “How can something be so unbearably sad and so beautiful at the same time?” Bob Williams died yesterday. But, he did not die alone – a truth that remains unbearably sad and beautiful still.

In the presence of Jesus’ love, a love that goes beyond death, we feel like falling down. At his name, we have to bend our knees because the truth in every one of us is going up to Jerusalem, down to our deaths. Every one of us will see the end sometime. But we do not have to do it alone. We can love one another to the end.

We can love one another like Jesus – who accepts today’s hosannas knowing that his friends will betray him, that the crowd will turn on him and that his only earthly crown will be pain. We can love one another like Jesus, who does not claim equality with God, but submits to God, emptying his own self so he can be filled with God’s love.

From his beautiful, bloody head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down. Our hymn asks, *Did er’ such love and sorrow meet or thorns compose so rich a crown?* Look, Jesus says: “This is how you do it.” And so, on this day of “glittering sadness,” lay down your palms. Take up your cross. Follow him. Amen.

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* Material drawn from a 2010 Palm Sunday essay by Sara Miles, *Sorrow and Love Flow Mingled Down*.

