

*“Come and Glorify...
Forsake and Flee”*

Palm/Passion Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11. Matthew 27:11-61

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A meditation delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Palm/Passion Sunday, April 9, 2017, dedicated to the memory of Sharon Walquist and Sandy Bennett who entered eternal life on Saturday, March 25 and Sunday March 26, 2017 & always to the glory of God!

“Come and Glorify...Forsake and Flee”

Matthew 21:1-11, Matthew 27:11-61

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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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We have entered Holy Week with loud “hosannas!” We are headed up to Jerusalem. Like the people of old, we have come to glorify him. Like Jesus, we are going down to our deaths. The question is, like the people of old, will we forsake him and flee from him? Will we leave him deny him, even run away from him?

For today, I implore you to go to the cross with our Lord.

Like Jesus, we are all headed toward a cross, one way or another. But there are different paths to the cross. One path is the way of the crowd. Another path is the way of separateness. The final path is the way of Jesus.

This Palm Sunday, these paths are held up for us to see, to survey from which to choose.

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 each one of 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 sing, “*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 way of the crowd is the desire to crucify. 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 today – Palm/Passion Sunday. 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 Rulers – whether they be Rulers of the Nation or religious leaders; whether leaders of the tribe or a certain club. 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 group.” With the crowd of palm-bearers, we bow and then 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).

There is also the way of separateness. The way of separateness takes us to our deaths alone. But we do not have to walk to death alone. We do not have to take up the cross by ourselves.

A few weeks ago, I witnessed the “Via Delarosa,” or “the way of the cross” for Sharon Walquist and Sandy Bennett, it was a hard way to go for each of them and their loved ones. But they were not alone. In the face of their suffering unto death, they were held by children and Larry for Sharon and Dick for Sandy. Sharon and Sandy knew they were not alone. As they approached their own personal “Golgotha,” there was both sadness and beauty at the same time. I wondered, *“How can something be so unbearably sad and yet they remain so beautiful at the same time?”* When first Sharon and then Sandy died within hours of each other on opposite sides of our city, each did not die alone – a truth that remains unbearably sad and beautiful still. They suffered unto to death – but not a death of separateness.

There is the way of the crowd and the way of separateness. But, they are the way to go. I pray you choose the third path, the way of Jesus.

The Way of Jesus is the path we are each called to follow. On the path with him, together we walk through the suffering and the pain of the cross. 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 is – every one of us is going up to Jerusalem. Every one of us is going 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. This is the way of Jesus.

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, his own being, 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: "*Come to the cross with me. This is how you do it.*" And so, on this day of "glittering sadness," lay down your palms. Take up your cross. Follow Jesus. Amen.

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

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