

**The First Community Church of Southborough
137 Southville Road
Southborough, Massachusetts 01772-1937**

The Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. – Pastor

www.firstcommunitychurch.com

Church: (508) 485-2607

Pastor: (508) 543-7160

Text: (508) 873-0534

Email: paulsandersonphd@gmail.com

**March 28, 2021 – The Sixth Sunday in Lent
Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday**

The Pastor's Reflection

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. is also available in audio form on our "Pod Cast" site as part of a devotional service. To access it, click on the link at the top of the Sermons page.

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 118:1-9, 21-29
John 12:1-19

"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." (Psalm 118:26)

Today is Palm Sunday. It is also known as Passion Sunday, so the liturgical color for today is either violet or red.

If we were meeting in church today, when you entered the narthex, the greeters would have handed you either a little cross made of palms that were made by the inhabitants of a village in Africa, or they would have handed you a palm branch. I prefer the palm cross for its symbolism, and also for another reason.

On those years when we distribute palm branches instead of palm crosses, I instruct the greeters to distribute the branches to everyone as they enter the church--everyone, that is, except the members of the choir; they receive their palm branches at the conclusion of the worship service. Two of the choir members have more than a marginal propensity to whip each other with the palms or use them to tickle people who are sitting in front of them. I am not going to name these two individuals, but I will say that the other two choir members, Beth and Jim, sadly shake their heads at the spectacle. I think you can see why my hair and beard are beginning to turn grey!

Speaking of entry, today I would like us to think about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, specifically the way the crowd greeted him. Their greeting may help us understand and perhaps even experience a deeper dimension of our relationship with Jesus and also with each other.

I like the bank I have used for many years in downtown Foxborough. For one thing, since I have my business checking in addition to our personal checking with them, the tellers call me "Dr. Sanderson." That makes me feel important! The only other person in town who calls me "Dr. Sanderson" is the owner of the dry-cleaning business that I patronize. Unfortunately, Jimmy just sold his business to a bigger chain; to them, I am just Mr. Sanderson. But that's not really the point. What was the point? Oh yes, it wasn't about the ways I compensate for my low self-esteem; it was about why I like banking where I do.

The real reason I like this bank is because of one of the tellers. Mahmta, who is from India and is a follower of the Sikh religion, knows that I have traveled in

India. Whenever people are not waiting in line behind me, we talk about my experiences in New Delhi, in Dharamshala, the Tibetan refugee community in the northwest corner of India where the 14th Dalai Lama lives, and the city of Varanasi (formerly called Benares) on the Ganges, probably the most sacred city in India. It was at the Deer Park in Benares that Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, preached his first sermon after his enlightenment.

In addition to our delightful conversations, Mamta always greets me by folding her hands, bowing slightly and saying *Namaste*. An Indian or Nepalese greeting that is more widely known and used in this country nowadays than it was twenty-two years ago when I first returned from my travels in Nepal and India, *Namaste* means “I recognize the holy or the divine in you.” You could also use “Namaskar,” which is more formal and polite. I like this greeting. It is more spiritual than “Hi,” “Good morning,” and “Howdy” (which may mean “How is your day?”)

Mamta has also taught me a Sikh greeting in Punjabi: “Sat Sri Akal.” “Sri” is an honorific title like “Lord.” “Sat” means truth. “Akal” means the Timeless Being or God. This greeting witnesses to the belief that God is the ultimate truth, and that eternal blessings come to those who know that God is the ultimate truth. I may not be a Sikh, though, not surprisingly, I experience a deep resonance with this spiritual path, but as a Christian I, too, believe that eternal blessings come to those who know that God is the ultimate reality, the ultimate truth.

A Muslim from any country, no matter their national language, when greeting someone says “As salam alaikum” or “As salam mu alaikum,” which is a more formal address, like using “Sie” instead of “Du” in German. This greeting means “Peace be with you.” The person addressed answers “Waa alaikum as salam” or “Peace be with you, too.” Muhammed insisted that Muslims should always greet each other in this way. My son, Corey, who is my resource for Hindu and Muslim spellings and pronunciation, has informed me that “salam” is the same basic word as the Hebrew “shalom.” This is very interesting. Once again, the greeting is actually a blessing.

The greetings of the crowd as Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of what we call Holy Week challenges us to think about how we “greet” Jesus. To adapt the title of one of Marcus Borg’s books, which we read in our study group, perhaps we should think about greeting Jesus again for the first time.

Whenever I can, I like to greet people in their native language. I recall my first meeting with a fellow adjunct professor who shared my office at Assumption College; our paths finally crossed a week or so before I retired. I had looked forward to meeting her because I wanted to impress her with my knowledge of German, just as I do with you from time to time, e.g., when I slip in the German word for some theological or especially some existentialist concept. I am not even close to being fluent in German, but because my mother’s family is from Germany and because, at least according to my wife and children, I embody certain personality traits characteristic of a German mentality, I have a lot of feeling for the country, the culture, and the language. (I am not sure whether my family means their observation as a compliment or not. But that’s not the point.)

The year I studied at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich, our family lived in a little farming village near the Black Forest in Baden-Wurttemberg, a province in southern Germany that borders on Switzerland. When we greeted people, we initially followed the Berlitz handbook directive to say “Guten Tag,” which means “good day.” After we got a puzzled look from several people and a muttered response that I couldn’t understand, one of our friends explained that no one in our little village addressed each other in that manner, and that to do so marked us as Americans. (I am still not sure why this should be a bad thing. But that’s not the point.) The point is that the customary greeting in that

province is “Gruss Gott.” “Gruss Gott means “I greet you in God” or “God’s greeting.” Once again, the greeting is actually a blessing.

So, in the process of introducing myself to the German teacher at my school, I took a chance and said *Gruss Gott*. She, being from Baden-Wurttemberg, lit up and responded *Gruss Gott!* This proved to be a nice lead-in to sharing my family’s experience living in Germany and, in particular, our two sons’ experience in the German schools.

“Gruss Gott” is a beautiful way to greet someone! It is like “Namaste” in Indian and “Tashi Delek” in Tibetan, each of which has a religious connotation. It arises from the awareness that *all meeting is holy meeting*, that God is present even in the casual encounter of two strangers on the road—present in a way that, perhaps, neither of the persons realizes.

Over time, religiously based greetings become ritualized and lose the impact of their original vision, at least in our culture. They go the way of “Godspeed” or “Adios.” When I was a teenager, a disc jockey on one of the Boston rock radio stations (it might have been WRKO or WBCN) used to close his broadcast by saying, “Vaya con Dios,” which means “Go with God” or “Travel with God.” Then he would add, “and you couldn’t have better company!” We certainly wouldn’t allow anything as offensive as that to be broadcast on our radio stations today! But Tucker Carlson and Rush Limbaugh are ok.

The customary Jewish greeting of Jesus’ day was either “Shalom,” which means “peace,” or the more formal “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” This phrase, as we just heard, comes from Psalm 118. As the king approached the temple to offer a gift of thanksgiving, the priests would say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

By Jesus’ time, this phrase had become the standard greeting for pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for a festival. As travelers streamed into the city for Passover, people would say to them, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” The blessing welcomed the pilgrim to Jerusalem and expressed the hope that he would enjoy the festival.

So, when the gospel writers tell us that the crowds greeted Jesus with “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” we can be confident that Jesus was not the only pilgrim to hear these words. This particular greeting or blessing did not mark Jesus as special. That is, until, as we just heard, the crowd added a single line: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord--*the King of Israel!*”

From this addendum, which hails Jesus at the King of Israel, we realize that the people had special expectations of Jesus. Reports of how Jesus had brought Lazarus back from the grave had spread throughout the land, and, as we heard, these rumors were of particular concern to the Pharisees. Whereas the Pharisees dreaded Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem, the common people eagerly awaited his arrival.

By the way, the Palm Sunday hymn *All Glory, Laud, and Honor* contains the following lines:

*All glory, laud, and honor
To Thee, Redeemer, King,
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring!*

Since I passed up the opportunity to study Greek and Hebrew in theological school because I thought that psychology would ultimately be more helpful to me in my ministry, I don’t know the Greek or Hebrew word that our Bible translates as “Hosanna.” However, just this past week, the Reverend Eric Elley, the Digital Minister

for the Southern New England Conference, UCC, in commenting on the traditional Palm Sunday reading, noted that “Hosanna!” was really not a “sweet” greeting arising from the lips of little children; it did not carry the connotation of “Hurray!” or even “You rock, Jesus!” It had more of the sense of “Save us!” and even “Save us now!” This gives us a sense of the urgency of the crowd’s expectations of Jesus, expectations that quickly morphed into demands.

With regard to the crowd’s expectations, the palm branches they waved were even more significant than the words they uttered. Palm branches were a nationalistic symbol. The waving of palm branches was an expression of hope that this young Galilean, who had already stirred up so much attention and who already had a devoted following, might strike a blow for the nation, a blow against Rome and for the freedom, the liberation of his homeland.

As we know, the crowd soon realized that what they expected from Jesus was not what they received. Jesus did not fulfill their expressed wants or desires. If only the crowd had remembered the words of the classic Rolling Stones’ song entitled *You Can’t Always Get What You Want*, they might have made a more creative adjustment to the experience of unrealized expectations. As the Stones tell us:

*You can’t always get what you want,
but if you try,
sometime,
you just might find,
you get what you need.*

On that Passover so many years ago, the crowd did not get what it wanted--a Messiah, a warrior-king, but it did receive what it needed--a savior. The crowd wanted Jesus to establish a kingdom modeled after his ancestor, David. Think how disappointed they must have been when Jesus, responding to the inquisition by Pilate, clarified his intentions by saying, “My kingdom is not of this world.” They must have been disappointed and perhaps even a little annoyed.

To the disappointment of the crowd and some of his disciples, especially those who were Zealots, Jesus was not a revolutionary or freedom fighter, at least not in their understanding of these terms. He did not arrive accompanied by trappings of power, but humble and lowly, riding on a donkey. He did not come in the name of the nation, but in the name of the Lord. The irony of this apparently escaped the crowd.

Instead of a conquering hero, the crowd got a suffering servant. Instead of a politician, it got a spiritual guide. The palm branches, which they waved with such fervor, turned out to represent a dashed hope for restored national power. The words that they uttered more as a custom than a conviction, turned out to signify the deeper truth, the truth that God, the Son of God, was in their midst.

One of the readers of my reflections, a colleague and friend who happens to be a Baptist minister in Rhode Island, has taken me to task for my assertion in a recent reflection that Jesus was not a revolutionary. In my defense, I believe that Jesus’ primary focus was not on trying to change the social order. Instead, he pointed us toward the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven that is within. I do agree with my colleague that Jesus’ message was countercultural, e.g., in the way he related to women. However, I believe that Jesus knew that the most effective, the most lasting way to bring about change is to change people’s hearts. Instead of trying to make our *present society* more compassionate, Jesus wants to make *each and every one of us* more compassionate!

My colleague responded by reasserting his belief that this message was, indeed, a revolutionary message. He then described Jesus as a “mystic revolutionary.” This

was the first time I had heard this term, and I really like it! So, thank you, Evan! It is humbling for me, a United Church of Christ minister, to learn from a Baptist, but, as some of you have noted, a little more humility might be just what I need!

Actually, I think Evan and I would agree that the following quote describes not only the way that Jesus confronted injustice but how he wants us to confront it. Perhaps this is what it means to be a “mystic revolutionary.”

Peacemaking doesn't mean passivity. It is the act of interrupting injustice without mirroring injustice, the act of disarming evil without destroying the evildoer, the act of finding a third way that is neither fight nor flight but the careful, arduous pursuit of reconciliation and justice. It is about a revolution of love that is big enough to set both the oppressed and the oppressors free.

Unfortunately, I do not know the author of this beautiful description of what it means to be a revolutionary.

“Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” “The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” “Come, Lord Jesus.” We say these phrases often in worship and prayer, scarcely knowing what we are saying, hardly expecting anything to happen. Then, at a time when we least expect, in a form that we could not have anticipated, coming down the road of our life is the one for whom we have hungered and thirsted!

What failed to happen to the crowd *can* happen to us. When we put down the palm branches of our self-serving ego-centric expectations of God and of life, we can experience the deeper reality that is both within us and in our midst. When we least expect our prayers to be answered, they are, though not always in the form that we desire. When we least expect God to be present in our lives as individuals, as families, and as a church, God is there both within and among us. This can happen to us in the smallest, most transient of moments, brief moments when we realize we have been touched by something transcendent.

Holy Week is a special time in the life of our church. Two years ago, when Darlene took the picture that graces the beginning of this Keeping in (Virtual) Touch missive, we began the week with a Palm Sunday breakfast put on by the Stewardship and Growth Committee. On Maundy Thursday, we shared a simple meal of bread and soup hosted by the D&D dinner duo, Darlene and Dianne; then we went upstairs for our Maundy Thursday worship service. At this service, we shared in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, remembering Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. Then, in observance of the ancient Order of Tenebrae, we read the biblical accounts of Holy Week accompanied by the extinguishing of a candle following every reading. On Easter Sunday, we met for the United Parishes of Southborough sunrise service by the side of the lake in Hopkinton and, later that morning, in our sanctuary. Last year, sadly, because of the pandemic restrictions we observed none of these meaningful rituals, special times when the symbols of faith that have the power to transport us into the transcendent dimension of life and of our life become actualized in worship or fellowship.

In the moments, the experiences of worship that are the heart and soul of Holy Week, we open ourselves to the realization that God is present not only in the Sacrament of the Last Supper, not only in our moments of worship on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter, but that *God is present in every human encounter*. Let us remember that when we extend a greeting such as “Namaste” or “Tashi Delek” or “Sat Sri Akal” or “Gruss Gott” or “As salam alaikum” or simply “Peace” to someone we meet, we witness to God's presence in the other person's life, in our own, and in our meeting, in our encounter, in our relationship.

This year, as we do the best we can to enter into the observance and also the inner experience of Holy Week, let us open our hearts to the presence of “the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” the one who comes to save us, the one who comes to set us free from that which imprisons us in a world that is much less loving, much less joyful than the one that God intends for us. Let us open our hearts to the possibility that our Lord may come to us, may be revealed to us *in and through another person*. If we remember this, we will be more inclined to view every human encounter, every meeting, every relationship as holy and sacred.

May the peace that comes through death and resurrection, the peace that comes through the inner journey of Holy Week be with us in the days to come. And as we journey forth in this sacred liturgical season of Lent, let us pray that the light within us and the light that we can bring to a darkened world will never go out.